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Hans Frei and David Tracy on the Ordinary and the Extraordinary in Christianity*

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Much has been written about the debate between David Tracy (1939–) and Hans Frei (1922–1988). The territory has been variously divided up, whether between “foundationalism” and “antifoundationalism,” “correlational” and “anticorrelational” theology, “postliberalism” and “revisionism,” “experiential-expressive” and “cultural-linguistic” theology, or simply between “Yale” and “Chicago.”¹

In this article I want to suggest that the map of the territory between the two has often been misdrawn and that Frei and Tracy stand in more

* I am grateful to David Ford, Stephen Sykes, John Webster, and two anonymous readers for the *Journal of Religion* who have all contributed helpful comments and criticisms at various stages in the evolution of this article.

¹ For that debate, see (among others) James J. Buckley, “Revisionists and Liberals,” pp. 327–42; and William C. Placher, “Postliberal Theology,” pp. 343–56, both in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, ed. David F. Ford, 2d ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997); Gary Comstock, “Two Types of Narrative Theology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55, no. 4 (1987): 687–717, and “Truth or Meaning: Ricoeur versus Frei on Biblical Narrative,” *Journal of Religion* 66, no. 2 (1986): 117–40; Werner Jeanrond, “The Problem of the Starting Point of Theological Thinking,” *Hermathena* 156 (1994): 1–28, and David Ford’s response in the same issue, pp. 28–39; George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (London: SPCK, 1984); Richard Lints, “The Postpositivist Choice: Tracy or Lindbeck?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 61, no. 4 (1993): 655–77; William C. Placher, “Revisionist and Postliberal Theologies and the Public Character of Theology,” *Thomist* 49, no. 3 (1985): 392–416, and “Paul Ricoeur and Postliberal Theology: A Conflict of Interpretations?” *Modern Theology* 4, no. 1 (1987): 35–52; Stephen L. Stell, “Hermeneutics in Theology and the Theology of Hermeneutics: Beyond Lindbeck and Tracy,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 61, no. 4 (1993): 679–703; Ronald F. Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), pp. 20 ff; Terrence W. Tilley, “Incommensurability, Intratextuality, and Fideism,” *Modern Theology* 5, no. 2 (1989): 87–111; Mark I. Wallace, *The Second Naïveté: Barth, Ricoeur and the New Yale Theology* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1990). An earlier version of my argument appears in chap. 5 of my Ph.D. thesis, “The Identity of Jesus Christ in the Church: An Exploration in the Theology of Hans Frei” (University of Cambridge, 1997).

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productive proximity than has normally been realized. I suggest that rather than being based on major methodological or doctrinal issues, their disagreements stem in large part from a difference in sensibility that goes with a difference in construal of what it is that Christian religious life consists in. Tracy, I will suggest, privileges the extraordinary—the disruptive, disquieting, mysterious, and fascinating transitions and transgressions of religious living. Frei, on the other hand, privileges the ongoing and cumulative, the repetitive and habitual, the ordered and grammatical practices of Christianity. It is the clash between these two construals and the sensibilities which fund them, which separates the two theologians—and such a clash is not so insurmountable or so absolute as many that have been thought to lie between Frei and Tracy.

I begin by looking at Frei's work in the light of Tracy's criticisms and showing that Frei's differences from Tracy stem ultimately from Frei's "ordinary" sensibility. I then turn to Tracy's work in the light of Frei's criticisms and show that Tracy's differences from Frei similarly stem from Tracy's "extraordinary" sensibility. I finish with some suggestions about what this claim means for the debate between the two.

HANS FREI, CORRELATION, AND THE ORDINARY

In *Dialogue with the Other* (1990), Tracy summarizes his understanding of Frei:

First, if the central confession is "Jesus is the Christ," then one must tell the story of this particular person in all its particularity in order to understand the confession itself. Second, narrative is the first and preferred mode of confession (or proclamation) used by the early Christian communities who wrote the New Testament texts in the genre of gospel, that genre of confessing narrative. To describe Christianity demands careful attention especially to the "passion-narratives" of the Gospels. Third . . . , the only hope of recovering Christian identity is to recover a "plain sense" reading of the biblical narratives again. For Frei, this demands abandoning the futile hope of "correlating" this narrative to some more general notions of "narrativity" or "religion" (or both).²

Although in agreement with the first two points, Tracy is ambivalent about the third. Positively, he says, "I too have learned from the incomparable Hans Frei just how central that 'plain sense' should be," and "Hans Frei's work has proved a breakthrough for all theology."³ Negatively, he finds himself unable to accept what he calls Frei's "anti-correlationalism,"

² David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other: The Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Louvain: Peter Press/Eerdmans, 1990), pp. 107–9.

³ David Tracy, "On Reading the Scriptures Theologically," in *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck*, ed. Bruce D. Marshall (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), pp. 35, 37.

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his supposed rejection of any “critically reflective role for theology,” his relegation of apologetics to a “merely” ad hoc role.⁴

Tracy was appreciative of Frei’s work and balanced any criticisms he had with recognition of Frei’s achievements. If we nevertheless focus on those criticisms and gather them together, we get a picture something like the following. Although Frei is good on promoting appropriate attention to the unsubstitutable particularity of Jesus of Nazareth expressed in the narrative of the Gospels, his work does not, according to Tracy, provide adequate resources for a serious attention to other truth claims and possibilities beyond the Christian narrative, at least not in such a way that they could significantly disrupt or question existing Christian claims and understandings. He is certainly willing to explore other claims, world-views and theories—Tracy knows that Frei does not have his head in the sand—but Tracy’s suspicion is that it is only when those cohere with what Christians already take to be the case in the light of their faith’s central confession, only, in other words, when such claims and theories can help with the description of existing faith rather than the transformation to new faith, that they are allowed to speak in any productive way.

Frei’s Earlier Work

If we look to Frei’s work for an answer to these criticisms, we must divide it into two periods, with the dividing point standing somewhere in the late 1970s. Frei’s early work focused on reading of those portions of the Gospels, which can be described as “realistic narrative” (primarily the passion narratives), in order to tease out their identification of their primary actor, Jesus of Nazareth.⁵ All his claims about the rest of the Bible and about Christian understandings of the world are grounded in that identification of Christ.⁶

⁴ David Tracy, “The Uneasy Alliance Reconceived: Catholic Theological Method, Modernity and Postmodernity,” *Theological Studies* 50, no. 3 (1989): 556–57, and 558–59 (my emphasis). Tracy also worries that Frei’s version of this narrative reading too easily harmonizes the different Gospels and pays insufficient attention to the multiple genres of Scripture. Tracy referred to Frei and Lindbeck as “methodologically sophisticated Barthian confessionalists” in his “Lindbeck’s New Program for Theology: A Reflection,” *Thomist* 49, no. 3 (1985): 465, and as theologians of a “new Barthianism” in his “On Naming the Present,” in *On Naming the Present: God, Hermeneutics, Church* (London: SCM, 1994) (hereafter cited as *ONP*), p. 13, reprinted from *Concilium* 210 (1990): 60–85. The theology of these “Barthian narrativists” is “the second coming of Barth in Christian theology,” according to David Tracy, “Literary Theory and the Return of the Forms for Naming and Thinking God,” *Journal of Religion* 74, no. 3 (1994): 310.

⁵ Hans Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 150 (hereafter cited as *IJC*).

⁶ One might compare the centrality of the confession “Jesus is Lord” in Tracy’s contribution to Robert M. Grant and David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* (London: SCM, 1984), pp. 182–83.

In approaching the Gospel narratives, Frei claimed that our reading is bound to employ all sorts of categories and concepts drawn from whatever sources prove useful, for without such resources in hand we cannot read, we can only mindlessly repeat.⁷ In *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, for instance, Frei appropriates sets of concepts for the description of human identity and its relationship to the public world; one from the philosophy of Gilbert Ryle ("intention-action description") and another from a conversation with German Idealistic philosophy ("self-manifestation description").⁸ These concepts get transformed and pruned as they are used to read the Gospel narrative, but they do not get abolished; without them or something like them, the reading is simply not possible. In this way, there is a necessary correlational moment embedded in Frei's early work—a conversation with understandings and conceptual schemes drawn from beyond the Christian faith enables a productive new grasp of that faith. It is true that *The Identity of Jesus Christ* is meant to be descriptive of Christian faith, and that this necessary correlation therefore takes place in the service of "description," but this is not, in Frei, in opposition to "transformation" or "critique." Frei's description of Christian faith is precisely a description of the ways in which that faith contains the resources for self-critique, for confronting itself with the identity of Jesus Christ without remaking that identity in its own image in the process. The correlation, in the service of a description of Jesus' identity, is thus a necessary part of the self-examination and critique of Christian faith.⁹

The next point to note is that Frei was led by his reading of the narrative identification of Jesus to an affirmation of the resurrection. Without prejudging questions of historicity, Frei examined the nonmythical, history-like shape of the relevant biblical texts and saw that in various ways the narrative structures of the texts (and particularly their depiction of the interaction of Jesus and the power he calls Father) form a climax in the resurrection, which is therefore at the heart of the Gospels' identification of Jesus. Frei claimed that anyone who believes these texts to be apt identifications of Jesus of Nazareth is therefore bound to affirm that, in some sense, the resurrection really happened: a Jesus without a resur-

⁷ One could almost say that there is a minimalist general hermeneutics contained in this claim.

⁸ Frei, *IJC*, pp. 91–94 and 94–101, and his "Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection," in *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays* (hereafter cited as *TN*), ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 62–64 and 64–70; originally published in *Christian Scholar* 49, no. 4 (1967): 45–93.

⁹ Other concepts prove to be thoroughly inappropriate for these texts—Frei rejects categories like "myth," e.g., as unable to do justice to the forms of depiction of Jesus of Nazareth—but all this means is that, for Frei as for Tracy, confrontation is one possible mode of correlation (see Frei, "Theological Reflections," pp. 87–91, and *IJC*, p. ix).

rection is too far removed from the Jesus depicted in these texts to be the same character.¹⁰

Frei remains reticent about exactly what did happen,¹¹ but he realizes that if he is serious about this it involves some kind of correlation with prevalent understandings of history and factuality. Although he has his reservations about the universal or reductive application of those frameworks of understanding, he believes that we are required to say that the resurrection is more nearly factual than not—or, more precisely, that a cogent historical-critical falsification of the resurrection would decisively undermine this affirmation.¹² This is not a grudging concession on Frei's part, but one of the main points of his argument. In other words, right at the heart of his theology (and Jesus' resurrection is at that heart) there is a serious correlation between the description of Jesus in the Gospels and general theories of history and factuality—not a wholesale appropriation of those theories but a genuine and risk-filled encounter with them nonetheless—the sort of encounter that could, to Frei's mind, call the whole structure of Christian faith into question.

The third point we should note is the implication that Frei drew from his affirmation of the resurrection. He claimed that, in the resurrection, Jesus is identified in the Gospels as, in some sense, the presence of God. Jesus is depicted as being, in his very particularity, one with the climactic action of God for the good of the world,¹³ and thus identified as one whose particular identity is significant for all reality. This claim in turn calls for a reading of all reality in the light of Jesus Christ, a mapping of all reality in terms of the significant identity of Jesus Christ.

Frei explains, though, that the nature of this light, if it is thought to be a light for the kind of reasons Frei has given, places constraints on the kind of reading or mapping of the world that we can pursue. Because the claim to the boundless significance of Jesus' particular identity has sprung from a reading of the realistic narrative depiction of Jesus of Nazareth, rather than from, say, a general cultural-linguistic theory of religion, reading in the light of Christ has a subtle logic. Frei says that we would be dissolving the particularity of that identity if we were to treat the story of Jesus as an imperialist metanarrative that unproblematically placed every other particular and gave us certain knowledge of the true

¹⁰ The argument at this point in *The Identity of Jesus Christ* is very complex and involves a reworking of Anselm's ontological argument for the existence of God as understood by Barth as an argument for the factuality of the resurrection. Nevertheless, the description I give covers the main point relevant to our discussion.

¹¹ Frei, *IJC*, pp. 150–52.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 151. This is a constant emphasis, and it is a travesty to claim, as some do, that Frei was not interested in questions of historicity.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

course of things. Rather, the particularity of Jesus enables us to see only “in a glass darkly,” discerning in hope patterns and similitudes in the world that we trust speak of the God of Jesus Christ but refusing to treat those patterns and similitudes as though they, rather than the unsubstitutable identity of Jesus from which we have tentatively drawn them, were the true subject matter of Christianity. The clue Jesus offers is therefore abidingly mysterious, less a present possession than an eschatological hope (a hope that the one who has his own historical specificity and density will be one with the one who sums up the whole of history in all its own historical density and specificity).¹⁴

In other words, Frei’s affirmation of Jesus’ significance for all reality funds a retrieval of typological or figural reading (a search for patterns in the world illuminated by the patterns of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection) that remains piecemeal, revisable, and tentative, so as not to turn Jesus into the name of a general principle rather than a person.¹⁵ Making our way in the world cannot be a case simply of following the unambiguous indications given us in the Christian faith; it must involve us in paying serious attention to all sorts of other things: particular truths, general claims, scientific or hermeneutical theories.¹⁶ To put it in Tracy’s terms, some of those truth claims and theories will be confronted by the affirmation of the identity and significance of Jesus Christ, some will be transformed by that affirmation, some will be able to coexist with that affirmation—but there is no way in which, this side of the eschaton, Christian faith provides the kind of clue that would allow us to dispense with any of the other partial and overlapping understandings of the world that we encounter on our pilgrimage. Such correlations are not simply icing but are constitutive ingredients in the formation of Christian lives.

To summarize this discussion of Frei’s early work: in the conceptually redescriptive process of reading Jesus’ identity, in the serious historical truth claim to which Frei thinks that reading leads, and in the process of realizing Jesus’ open-textured significance, we see Frei constantly proposing a necessary but ad hoc correlation between Christian affirmations and other theories, concepts and claims to truth. Here “ad hoc” does not refer to the frequency, or the seriousness, or the centrality of these correlations, but to their logic: to the fact that none of them is allowed to overwhelm the particular shape of the unsubstitutable identity of Jesus of Nazareth

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 163. Compare my article, “‘A Carefully Circumscribed Progressive Politics’: Hans Frei’s Political Theology,” *Modern Theology* 15, no. 1 (1999): 55–83.

¹⁵ *IJC*, p. 162. For more on “figuration,” see the index of *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 1974) under “interpretation, figural.”

¹⁶ Frei, *IJC* (n. 5 above), pp. 163–64.

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as portrayed in these texts. Frei, in his earlier work, is a correlational theologian through and through.¹⁷

Frei's Later Work

In his later work, Frei examines the reading of these Gospel texts in the church and construes the church as a cultural-linguistic community whose language it is theology's job to trace. At times this can sound as if he regards the church as a coherent and harmonious language-using communion, and theology as simply an ethnographic tracing of that community's "grammar." The worry from Tracy would obviously be that Frei's theology at this point does not provide adequate resources for challenging or correcting the shape of that Christian practice. However, the logic of Frei's position is more complex than that.

The shift to a more ecclesiological focus was not a complete break for Frei. It developed as he became dissatisfied with his earlier claims about "realistic narrative" and moved away from the idea that the Gospel texts force certain kinds of reading by their very nature and toward the idea that the church has contingently fostered particular modes of attention to Jesus Christ, albeit ones for which the Gospel texts are apt.¹⁸ Instead of a literary theory providing the warrant for his christological claims, therefore, Frei's later work focuses on the contingent, contestable practices of a certain set of communities.¹⁹

Nevertheless, Frei is interested in these sorts of claims precisely as a reformulation of the grounds for the kinds of christological argument that we have just been examining—an argument that was all about providing for an identity description of Jesus that was not controlled by the individual or communal whims of Christians but could shape them. Frei still wants to speak of all the elements we discussed above: the narrative identification of Jesus of Nazareth, the centrality of the resurrection, and the typological reading of all reality in the light of Jesus' particular identity, and even if he now wants to talk about the way in which such a reading is appropriate to the practices of Christian communities, he still thinks that this is one of the ways that such communities have of pointing be-

¹⁷ To some ears, this will sound like a rather contrived conclusion. It should be remembered, however, that Frei in his typology described each of types 2, 3, and 4 as correlational—and placed himself most firmly in type 4. See Hans Frei, *Types of Christian Theology* (hereafter cited as *TCT*), ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 30–46 and *passim*.

¹⁸ See, primarily, "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative in Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?" in *TN* (n. 8 above), pp. 117–52. The paper was originally delivered in 1983.

¹⁹ For example, Frei, *TCT*, pp. 3–14.

yond themselves and admitting the presence of something that can call them into question.²⁰

In our context, we should note various things. First, Frei claims that his attention to the reading practices of the Christian community, pursued for theological reasons, will cohere with some sociological and anthropological descriptions of those communities (albeit not with sociologically reductive explanations). In particular, Frei discusses and appropriates the work of Clifford Geertz. The claims of Frei's theology at this point are therefore open to a new debate or conversation with other disciplines; his theology here is correlational, albeit one carried out in the service of description more than critique.

Second, Frei does not seek to present the church as a harmoniously and organically coherent community with well-defined boundaries, presenting a glassy face to the world.²¹ He used "pilgrimage" as a primary metaphor for describing Christian identity: Christians are, in all the correlational ways of which I spoke while discussing his earlier work, on their way toward belief, a belief that they now only see through a darkened glass, partially, tentatively, and reticently. The correlational aspects I have identified in his theology are not subsequent and unimportant ornaments to a belief already achieved but at the heart of this process of pilgrimage and exploration.²²

Third, the way in which Frei understands Christians' exploration and application of the identity of Jesus becomes, in his later work, more thoroughly correlational. In his earlier work it was already clear that different perceptions of the identity of Jesus would emerge with the appropriation of different conceptual resources—that is, different correlations. Now, it becomes clear that, in a similar way, different understandings and insights into the identity of Jesus will emerge in the very process of trying to understand how different situations in the world speak of the presence of the God of Jesus Christ. Hence, Frei says, "I think a Christian case can be made that we have not met the textual Jesus until we have also met him, as Søren Kierkegaard said, in forgetfulness of himself or incognito in a crowd."²³ It is the Jesus who is depicted in the Gospels—the "textual" Jesus—who we meet in the world, yet this is not simply more of the same, a confirmation of what we already knew, because it is only in meeting Christ incognito that we can claim to have met the textual Jesus. The

²⁰ See, for this continuity in his work, Hans Frei, "Of the Resurrection of Christ," in *TN*, pp. 201–12. The article was written in 1987.

²¹ That would run counter to his whole sensibility. For a sensitive account, see John F. Woolverton, "Hans W. Frei in Context: A Theological and Historical Memoir," *Anglican Theological Review* 79, no. 3 (1997): 369–93.

²² On pilgrimage, see Frei, *IJC*, pp. 8–9, 151–52.

²³ Frei, *TCT*, p. 136.

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world and the textual Jesus are, in other words, mutually illuminating. This is a thoroughly correlational theology.

Frei's Sensibility

Nevertheless, despite all that I have said, Tracy is bound to keep pushing the question. He might concede that Frei is *de jure* able to include a robust correlative moment within his theology, but does Frei not fail *de facto* to pursue this as far as is necessary? Does Frei really pursue it in such a way as to fulfill his academic, social, and ecclesial responsibilities as a theologian?²⁴

Tracy is insistent that the theologian who has traced the identity of God in Jesus Christ may not stop there, since "the further theological question occurs, in the Catholic tradition, of how this christic understanding of God's identity as love correlates with the human quest for God."²⁵ This will amount to "placing" the Christian understanding of God "on the language-map of all developed philosophical theisms," relating it to human beings' fundamental existential questions, and so forth. To stop short of this is, to Tracy's mind, theologically irresponsible.²⁶

There is, it must be admitted, some truth in this criticism. For instance, despite saying of H. Richard Niebuhr that his moral christology needed to be supplemented with more explicit metaphysics, Frei never worked at such metaphysical redescription himself; despite worrying that Karl Barth gave an "all too easy" description of *anhypostasis* and *enhyposstasis*, Frei never really worked hard on the explicit reappropriation of traditional christological categories and concepts; despite paying increasing attention to Judaism and despite having George Lindbeck as a colleague, Frei was never prominent in ecumenical or interreligious dialogues.²⁷

²⁴ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), chaps. 1 and 2 (hereafter cited as *AI*).

²⁵ David Tracy, "Approaching the Christian Understanding of God," in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, ed. Francis Schussler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 140.

²⁶ At this stage Tracy entered into an unlikely pact with Colin Gunton, who accused Frei of stopping short at the descriptive level, rather than pushing on into ontological questions. Gunton said of Frei's interpretation of Barth in *Types of Christian Theology* that "all hangs on the much used notion of conceptual redescription which [Frei] takes as the way to understand what Barth is doing or attempting. . . . But however realistically we read the Wittgensteinian terminology, what is lacking is an appreciation of the thoroughly ontological character of Barth's theology"; Colin Gunton, review of *TCT* in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 49, no. 2 (1996): 233–34.

²⁷ Hans Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," in *Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), pp. 116 and 111; cf. "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative," p. 149.

There are many conversations into which Frei never entered, which the responsibilities of academic theology to its conceptual past and to its present global context render urgent.

However, I hope I have shown that Frei's work is not necessarily closed to such questions and conversations. The limitations of his work in these directions were not imposed by any significant methodological or substantive constraints.²⁸ What, then, accounts for these limitations? Is it simply chance, or the academic division of labor that dictated Frei's and Tracy's very different choice of conversation partners and topics of investigation? No doubt there is some truth in that. I suggest, however, that there is a deeper reason, and that the answer is connected with a certain sensibility, very different from Tracy's, that informs all of Frei's work.

Early in his academic theological career, Frei suggested that Barth had a "secular sensibility," associated with the conviction that there do not exist in creaturely reality inherent structures or points-of-contact by means of which the mind or the feelings might lift themselves to God. When considered apart from the Word of God, which is not contained in them, creaturely realities are inherently susceptible to a plurality of always partial descriptions. By way of example, he pointed to Barth's comments on his experience of the strangeness of America, and said, "It is not only the case, I believe, that Barth took pleasure in the vast variety of this indefinitely expansive human experience in this vast natural context—not only that he affirmed every part of it, at once in and for itself and for its potentiality as a *figura* of God's fulfilling work. Additionally, I believe, he looked with a long, cool, scepticism at that scene and every part of it because he believed that none of it shows that figural potentiality by any inherent

²⁸ There are various places where Frei moved tentatively in the direction of some of these conversations. For instance, he spoke in 1982 about the importance of the relation of the Christian concept of God to other, philosophical theisms ("Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative: Some Hermeneutical Considerations," in *TN*, pp. 100–101); he had begun, partly I think in response to dissatisfaction with Lindbeck's work on truth, to develop a Trinitarian (and resolutely ontological) understanding of the nature of theological truth claims (see letter to William C. Placher, 3 November 1986; Hans Wilhelm Frei Papers, Manuscript Group no. 76 [box 4, folder 78], Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library); he had begun to reflect more and more seriously on Christianity's relation to Judaism (see n. 18 above); and last, but most significantly, the vast majority of Frei's work in the 1970s (most of it, sadly, unpublished) was spent in lengthy, detailed, and subtle conversation with Kant, Herder, Lessing, and Strauss—precisely the sort of question-setting thinkers ignorance of whom might constitute academic theological irresponsibility in the late twentieth century (see many relevant lectures and papers in the archive in the Yale Divinity School Library; the only significant piece published after *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* in this line was Hans Frei, "David Friedrich Strauss," in *Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West*, vol. 1, ed. Ninian Smart, John Clayton, Steven Katz, and Patrick Sherry [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984], an essay Frei finished in the late 1970s).

qualities or signs of its own—either positive or negative.”²⁹ In other words, two things go together according to Frei’s reading of Barth: on the one hand a doctrine of the *analogia fidei* (according to which talk about God is not possible on the basis of some inherent relationship to God present in things themselves apart from their illumination by the Word of God, but possible because God graciously by Word and Spirit continually calls into being a people to correspond to God in their speaking) and on the other hand a “skeptical” acceptance of the resistance of worldly realities to grand, all-encompassing descriptions—whether based on a dialectic of history or on a psychological reductivism—that might provide a foothold for a robust apologetic. What happens in Barth’s theology to this resistance once one has brought the Word of God into account need not concern us here.

Frei himself possessed a very similar sensibility, but for him it became a more positive focus on the character of human action and interaction that in its richness and stubbornness is always outstripping meta-narratives, and for him this focus definitely remains when the Word of God is brought into account. In his earlier work, this sensibility was expressed primarily through his concentration on realistic narrative: a strong christological focus and broad theological claims go hand in hand with a concentration on the level of human action and interaction appropriately depicted in novelistic or history-like narratives that do justice to the density and contingency of human affairs. During the 1970s, between what I have called his earlier and later work, this sensibility was expressed primarily through his devotion to what we might call theological history, such as the detailed historical material in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, through the fine-grained tracing of the structures of thought and action of key players in Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment debates about religion (particularly Kant, Herder, Lessing, and Strauss).³⁰ At the transition from his earlier work, the same sensibility was expressed in an increasingly rich focus on the social history of modern Christianity and theology.³¹ In his later work, this latter strand came to fruition in Frei’s focus on the church as “a community held together by constantly changing, yet enduring structures, practices, and institutions, as other

²⁹ Hans Frei, “Karl Barth: Theologian,” in *TN* (n. 8 above), p. 172; reprinted from *Reflection* 66, no. 4 (1969): 5–9. Frei is referring to the preface to the American edition of Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1963), p. vi.

³⁰ See n. 28 above.

³¹ The material published in *Types of Christian Theology* was all ordered toward such a history; see Frei, *TCT*, p. 1. Frei took a trip to England in 1981 to look at records of two parish churches, but that more directly socialhistorical approach was left untapped when he died.

religious communities are: for example, a sacred text, regulated relations between an elite . . . and a more general body of adherents, a set of rituals—preaching, baptism, the celebration of communion, common beliefs and attitudes—all of which are linked . . . with a set of narratives connected with each other in a sacred text and its interpretive tradition. All of these are, for social scientist and theologian, not the *signs* or *manifestations* of the religion; they constitute it in complex and changing coherence.”³²

All in all, there is a focus in Frei on the ordinary, on the level of social interaction, on the middle distance between individual psychology and universal *Geist*. He is interested in tracing the regularities and diversities, the habits and evolutions, that such actions and interactions manifest; not as symptoms of a deeper structure or reality behind that action, but as the shapes and structures of the action onto which our descriptions can fasten. Borrowing a term from literary criticism, we might say that much of Frei’s work constitutes a “prosaics” of Christianity.³³ The primary questions for Frei were not the broad ontological and philosophical questions of a Colin Gunton or a Tracy, important though those are; Frei saw his academic and theological responsibilities as requiring above all a historical and ethnographic faithfulness to the endless peculiarity of, and endless resemblances between, particular instantiations of Christianity, the diverse construals of Jesus’ identity and significance embedded in them, and the complex correlations with that identity that the practitioners find in their situations, in all the messy and convoluted ordinariness of this endlessly diverse world.

DAVID TRACY, PARTICULARITY, AND THE EXTRAORDINARY

Having outlined Tracy’s criticisms of Frei, seen Frei’s responses, and come to at least a provisional understanding of Frei’s differences from Tracy, it is time to turn the tables and look at Frei’s criticisms of Tracy and the latter’s responses.

Is Tracy a “Foundationalist”?

Frei’s bluntest criticism of Tracy—and his criticisms of Tracy tended to be blunter than Tracy’s of him—was that the latter’s theology inappropriately subjects Christianity to “separately statable, general, and fields-

³² Frei, *TCT*, p. 22.

³³ See Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1989). “Middle distance” is also a borrowed term; see J. P. Stern, *On Realism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973).

encompassing criteria”—that is, that Tracy hacks away at the Christian faith in order to fit it onto a short bed of general philosophical claims. Frei thinks such an approach, which others have labeled “foundationalist,” bound to fail in its very generality and systematicity to do justice to the particularity of Christian faith.

Frei’s main launchpad for this criticism was his typology of Christian theology, developed in the context of a proposed historical study involving attention to the institutional setting of theology in nineteenth-century Germany, particularly Berlin.³⁴ The typology itself grew out of Frei’s recognition that Friedrich Schleiermacher had achieved a subtle synthesis in his successful championing of a place for theology in that university, balancing the requirements of training for practical leadership within the Church (i.e., training in the linguistic and practical skills and resources internal to Christianity) with the university’s governing ideal of *wissenschaftlich* inquiry (i.e., inquiry governed by general, fields-encompassing “scientific” method).³⁵

Frei’s typology distributes theologies according to the way in which they relate the two poles that Schleiermacher balanced: on the one hand “Christian self-description,” that is, “first-order statements or proclamations made in the course of Christian practice and belief” (together with “the Christian community’s second-order appraisal of its own language and actions under a norm or norms internal to the community itself”), and on the other hand, “general criteria of intelligibility, coherence, and truth” shared with other academic disciplines, particularly philosophy.³⁶

Tracy he placed under “type 2”: “In type 2, theology is . . . a philosophical or academic discipline, but within that ordering, the specificity of Christian religion is taken very seriously, in a way in which external description and self-description [i.e., the two poles of the typology] merge into one, and the joint product is justified by a foundational philosophical scheme.”³⁷ Subtle though that justifying scheme may be, such theology is always “finally . . . a matter of *subsuming* the specifically Christian under the general, experiential religious, as one ‘regional’ aspect”—or so Frei claimed.³⁸

Tracy’s response to Frei can best be approached by looking at Tracy’s view on the nature of theology as a discipline, a view that has strong links back to Schleiermacher’s Berlin settlement. Tracy distinguishes three

³⁴ Frei, *TCT* (n. 17 above), p. 1.

³⁵ Frei acknowledged that the typology had limited application beyond the traditions of academic theology decisively shaped by the Berlin settlement; *ibid.*, p. 120.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 34 (my emphasis).

subdisciplines of theology: fundamental, systematic, and practical.³⁹ Fundamental theology addresses the academy and focuses on warrants and criteria intelligible to “any reasonable person”; systematic theology addresses the church and aims to produce interpretations of the tradition faithful to the church’s own norms; practical theology addresses society, aiming at transformative and liberating praxis in response to some situation of social evil. The obvious place to locate Tracy’s response to the issues raised by Frei’s typology is in his discussion of the joint between fundamental and systematic theology.

Tracy has made use of three distinguishable modes of fundamental theology: the first is aimed simply at explication of the Christian worldview to a particular (secular) intellectual culture;⁴⁰ the second mode takes a few key Christian claims and constructs a philosophical argument for their truth, more or less independent from the systematic theology that gave rise to those claims;⁴¹ and the third mode argues for the truth of

³⁹ Tracy, *AI*, chap. 2 (n. 24 above); David Tracy and John B. Cobb, Jr., *Talking about God: Doing Theology in the Context of Modern Pluralism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1983).

⁴⁰ In 1973, Tracy said that “the major contribution of process thinkers is precisely that they force the issue of our understanding of God to a level of conceptual clarity—and thereby of public availability”; see David Tracy, “God’s Reality: The Most Important Issue,” *Anglican Theological Review* 55, no. 2 (1972): 218. He argued that process categories made better sense of biblical language and modern sensibilities concerning God than did the concepts of “classical theism.” Since then, however, he has become progressively more circumspect; he now thinks that sometimes the conceptual redescription given by “modern progressive Christian theology . . . has been divorced from the actual history of the Jesus in and through whom God has decisively disclosed the God who acts in history”; from David Tracy, “God of History, God of Psychology,” in *ONP* (n. 4 above), p. 49; the article was reprinted from *Concilium*, vol. 5 (1993). The process tradition is in danger of rendering God a “conceptual prisoner” and doing scant justice to God’s Trinitarian life, according to David Tracy, “Kenosis, Sunyata, and Trinity: A Dialogue with Masao Abe,” in *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), p. 139.

⁴¹ Christians, Tracy said, live and talk as if God were the ground of fundamental structures of their existence, of the always already graced nature of the universe (“God’s Reality,” p. 221). Theology inevitably asks whether there are appropriate ways of testing this claim and whether those ways will make sense to non-Christians. Tracy claimed in his earliest work that a transcendental phenomenological analysis is both appropriate and publicly available; see, primarily, David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (1975; reprint, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), hereafter cited as *BRO*. He claimed a correspondence between the ultimate ground of being revealed by transcendental analysis of human being and the God revealed in the Bible. As Frei said, “external description [transcendental philosophical analysis] and self-description [Christian talk about the Biblical God] merge into one.” Frei went on to say, though, that “the joint product is justified by a foundational philosophical scheme” (*TCT*, p. 30), but Tracy’s implicit claim is that the philosophical scheme *cannot* be seen as coming first since that would be to deny the identity between the philosophy and the claims of faith. Nevertheless, Tracy has subsequently become convinced that there is a gap between transcendental philosophical and Christian identifications of God. He said in 1993, “The . . . God of historicity . . . disclosed by an analysis of the existential and transcendental conditions of possibility of the modern historical subject . . . seems far removed from the dangerous and disruptive God of the history narrated in Exodus and in the history of Jesus” (*ONP*, pp. 50–51).

systematic theology itself and has both dominated Tracy's theology since the late seventies and tended to absorb the other two modes of his fundamental theology.⁴²

"Systematic theology, on the other hand, is church theology, and entails interpreting the scriptures as a believing member of the community for the community and in fidelity to the community's own norms."⁴³ It is a reflection on the "first-order" discourse of the Christian tradition (i.e., on the "significant gestures, symbols and actions of the various Christian traditions") produced with a fundamental loyalty to the church.⁴⁴ Recently, Tracy described systematic theology as the attempt of theologians both to find concepts that will prove illuminating but not overwhelming for identifying God "in and through the event and person of Jesus Christ," and "to write the history of the present in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ."⁴⁵ More frequently, he has said that systematic theology explores a possible "way-of-being-in-the-world" as it finds it disclosed in the classic texts, practices, people, and events of the Christian tradition.⁴⁶

Tracy's third and dominant mode of fundamental theology argues for the truth of such systematic theology by means of hermeneutical theory. According to Tracy, Gadamerian hermeneutical theory is intended as a description and explication of already practiced processes of interpreting the world and ways of being opened up by particular classic "texts" (broadly construed). Hermeneutic theory can therefore, he says, be an appropriate guide to systematic theology: it is no innovation or procrustean violence to claim that systematic theology is and always has been interested in Jesus Christ, the Christian scriptures, and Christian tradition as revelatory of the nature of the universe and of the appropriate forms of living in it.

Tracy does not regard this appropriated hermeneutic theory as foundational for theology. Rather, it is an abstraction from the concrete practice of reading, "necessary to correct confusions in the concrete."⁴⁷ The theory is meant to uncover the presuppositions of the already existing

⁴² See David Tracy, "John Cobb's Theological Method: Interpretation and Reflections," in *John Cobb's Theology in Process*, ed. David Ray Griffin and Thomas J. J. Altizer (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), for the distinction between mode 1 and the others; see the differences between Tracy, *BRO*, and the first, fundamental theological part of Tracy, *AI*, for the distinction between the second and third modes.

⁴³ Robert M. Grant and David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 2d ed. (London: SCM, 1984), p. 182.

⁴⁴ Tracy, *BRO*, p. 49; cf. Tracy and Cobb, *Talking about God*, pp. 2, 18; Tracy, *AI*, p. 22.

⁴⁵ Tracy, "The Return of God in Contemporary Theology," in *ONP*, p. 37 (reprinted from *Concilium*, vol. 6 [1994]), and *ONP*, p. 5.

⁴⁶ This is above all expressed in *AI*.

⁴⁷ Tracy, *AI*, p. 89.

practice of reading religious texts present in systematic theology; it is also meant to argue for one kind of public availability for systematic theology by showing that those presuppositions make sense within the context of a rationality not specifically Christian or religious.⁴⁸ Thus the existence of the practice allows and calls for the appropriation of the theory; the theory is appropriate to the practice.

In a 1990 discussion of Lindbeck and Frei, Tracy said, “a general hermeneutical theory, like a ‘modest’ use of Auerbach on ‘realistic narrative’, can inform without ‘taking over’ a theological analysis of scriptural texts. . . . It is important to observe that the use of hermeneutical analysis . . . in [the latter part of *The Analogical Imagination*] is coherent with but not logically dependent upon the use of general hermeneutics in the earlier chapters’ analysis of ‘the classic’ . . . or the ‘religious classic.’” His use of hermeneutics is, therefore, he says, “clarificatory (not foundationalist).”⁴⁹

More precisely, I suggest, the reader of *The Analogical Imagination* is led through a series of concentric analyses toward systematic theology.⁵⁰ First, she is introduced to Gadamerian hermeneutical theory in general and to the processes of interpretation and understanding whereby a particular text can prove itself to be a classic, rather than a period piece, and to open up in its complex hierarchy of structures a possible world for the reader to inhabit, a possible way of construing reality.⁵¹ Next, she is introduced to specifically religious hermeneutics, in which these processes and analyses are intensified and transformed by the presence in the reader and in the text of “ultimate questions,” which ensure that the disclosure

⁴⁸ “Bear with me . . . as I shift . . . Gadamer’s own German ontological vocabulary into my own Anglo-American experiential *de facto* language. . . . His basic claim, after all, is not to provide a *de jure* set of rules for interpretation in the manner of the neo-Kantians. His claim is the quite distinctive one of articulating the *de facto* process of interpretation operative in any interpreter of the text”; from David Tracy, “Hermeneutical Reflections in the New Paradigm,” in *Paradigm Change in Theology: A Symposium for the Future*, ed. David Tracy and Hans Küng (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark), p. 38.

⁴⁹ Tracy, “On Reading the Scriptures Theologically” (n. 3 above), pp. 58–59. The mention of Auerbach is a reference to Frei’s procedure in *The Identity of Jesus Christ* and *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*.

⁵⁰ The following analysis is inspired by Frei’s own analysis of Schleiermacher in Hans Frei, “Barth and Schleiermacher: Divergence and Convergence,” in *TN* (n. 8 above), pp. 192–93, originally delivered in 1986. Frei talks of Schleiermacher’s “borrowings” from *wissenschaftlich* subjects in the prolegomena to *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1968) as a series of concentric circles bringing the reader toward an understanding of the particular character of the Christian church that can itself “neither be comprehended and deduced by purely scientific methods nor be grasped by mere empirical methods” (*The Christian Faith*, sec. 1.2). The final step to understanding involves simply “a little introspection” (*The Christian Faith*, sec. 4, p. 13), which is, as Frei says, simply a “common-sense instrument.”

⁵¹ Tracy, *AI*, chap. 3 (n. 24 above).

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wrought in the reading of the text is no longer simply a possibility for living but a truth about the fundamental patterning of the universe in which the reader lives. In one sense this is simply a regional application of the hermeneutical theory developed in the previous analysis; in another sense, however, the religious intensification transforms the hermeneutical frame: Tracy's chapter on the religious classic contains more material, new material, when compared to the chapter on general hermeneutics; it does not simply contain a specification of the earlier chapter's generalities.⁵² In a third moment, Tracy turns from an analysis of the religious classic in general to the specifically Christian classic. Once again, I suggest that while in many ways this appears to be simply a regional application of the more general theory (as Frei claimed), in actual fact the focus on this particular religious tradition with its central classic, the man Jesus of Nazareth, transforms and even perhaps "subverts" the more general hermeneutics.⁵³

This claim might seem more reasonable if we look at Tracy's work from a different direction. Tracy implies a degree of independence among the three theological subdisciplines. The distinctions between these disciplines are introduced as corollaries of the differing socializations of the people whom the theologian addresses (including the theologian herself). Some theologians and audiences are primarily socialized into the academy; some primarily into a church tradition; and some primarily into a social, political, or cultural movement. An addressee cannot be spoken to as if she were unsocialized but must be addressed via the plausibility structures inherent in her primary socialization (in ways that are admittedly correlated with the plausibility structures of secondary and tertiary socializations).⁵⁴ This way of describing the subdisciplines puts them on a logical level and enables Tracy to indicate in his descriptions of each of them how one might be wary of submitting entirely to the dominance of either of the other two descriptions.⁵⁵ In other words, this framework allows mutually critical relationships between the subdisciplines, and hence allows for the transformation or subversion by systematic theology of the structures and suggestions gained from fundamental theology.⁵⁶

⁵² Ibid., chap. 4.

⁵³ This way of putting the point was suggested to me in conversation by George Lindbeck; Tracy, *AI*, chap. 5.

⁵⁴ Tracy does speak of this socialization as in some way "penultimate," and of the addressees of theology as being ultimately "single ones," but it seems to me that this notion of address to a presocial single one is a regulative idea or an asymptote toward which theological discourse might tend, rather than itself being in any way executable.

⁵⁵ See, e.g., Tracy, *AI*, p. 66.

⁵⁶ As an indication that something like the above account is apt; note the apparent reversal of priority of Systematic and Fundamental theologies between *AI* and "Approaching the Christian Understanding of God" (n. 25 above), p. 135.

Is Jesus' Particularity only Penultimate?

In a more substantive, less purely methodological criticism of Tracy, Frei claimed that, at its heart, hermeneutical theory of the kind favored by Tracy revolves around the idea that "meaning" has to do with consciousness or inward experience. More precisely, Frei claimed that on this view hermeneutics begins with the conscious self and its preconceptual experience, and notes that such a self can "mediate this lived and preconceptual selfhood, both to itself and to the outside, by means of concepts, or, better, by means of symbols and metaphors that express and disclose the immediate self."⁵⁷

Texts are just such symbolic expressions of the preconceptual consciousness of their authors; the hermeneutical reader will use the textual expression to reconstruct in herself a consciousness related to that which produced the text.⁵⁸ Such a theory, according to Frei, envisages a world in which human beings are primarily consciousnesses and in which social relations and bodily actions are secondary to modes of consciousness.

Frei thought such a view unable to do justice to the particularity of Jesus. If the referent of the Gospel texts is a mode of consciousness, he argued, then Jesus is their referent only as the bearer of that mode of consciousness, to which his social relations and bodily actions are secondary. In that case, for example, "that Jesus was crucified is not a decisive part of his personal story, only that he was so consistent in his 'mode-of-being-in-the-world' as to take the risk willingly."⁵⁹ In fact, says Frei, Jesus will be seen as "a temporary personal thickening within the free-flowing stream of a general class of describable dispositional attitudes."⁶⁰ The question we must ask, then, is whether Tracy's hermeneutics can do justice to the particularity of Jesus of Nazareth.

In some ways, this is a surprising question to pose: the whole point of *The Analogical Imagination* and Tracy's appropriation of hermeneutics is to find a way to hold together the particularity of a tradition with its general, public significance. Tracy's theory of the "classic" is meant to guide us toward the realization that a particular life, text, or community can precisely in its particularity be the bearer of a significance for all times and all places; his implicit claim is that in the case of Christianity this conjunction is raised to a new level with the particularity of Jesus and the truth of the nature of the universe being held inseparably together.

⁵⁷ Frei, *TCT* (n. 17 above), p. 31.

⁵⁸ Frei, "Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative" (n. 28 above), p. 101. Compare Frei, "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative" (n. 18 above), p. 125.

⁵⁹ Frei, "The 'Literal Reading,'" p. 126.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

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A more precise response to the criticism can be made if we note that the referent of classic texts is, according to Tracy, not simply some set of attitudinal stances such as peaceableness, or consistency in the face of death, but also some claims about what is true about the world. It is a compound of what Geertz calls “worldview” and “ethos.”⁶¹ In other words, “mode-of-being-in-the-world” involves attitudes and stances only insofar as they are bound up with a view or claim about what is true, about what in sheer actuality is the case. The ability to speak of the referent of these texts as both a way in which we can be disposed toward the world and a description of what (or who) has decisively taken place is, therefore, built into the theory from the beginning—and this opens the possibility that Frei’s criticism is one-sided. Is the presence of the attitudinal as part of the referent necessarily any more confusing than the Barthian claim that these texts, precisely in being about God and God’s relation to us, are also about us?

Nevertheless, pushing Frei’s criticism can help us to see a genuine ambiguity and difficulty in Tracy’s presentation. It is not clear that, in *The Analogical Imagination*, Tracy had developed adequate ways either for speaking of Jesus’ particularity or for making the significance of that particularity plain. For instance, the section on narrative⁶² moves too quickly from talking about the particularities of the story of Jesus to talking about his disclosure of the “sovereignty of the agapic” or to the memory of Jesus as a defamiliarizing, challenging, and dangerous memory—in short, to the “religious and existential significance” of the narratives. Tracy all too easily says that “the concentration of these gospel narratives upon the single person and proclamation of Jesus in the narratives, and upon the proclamation of Jesus Christ by the whole confessing narrative, concentrates the attention of any individual reader, as such a narrative of a single life must, upon that reader’s *own* individuality as authentic or inauthentic.”⁶³

Further, when Tracy speaks of the “worldview” referent of these texts he, at this stage, is more prone to refer to what is always and everywhere the case, rather than to events transpiring in the public world. For instance, he speaks of religious texts having to do with “a truth about life itself,” with the “meaning of existence,” with “what is sensed as the whole of reality,” and with “certain universal and elemental features of human existence”; when concentrating on the specifically Christian classic, he says that “the *always-already reality of a graced world* is made present again deci-

⁶¹ Tracy, *AI* (n. 24 above), pp. 7; 35, n. 19; 144, n. 64; 163; 455.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 275–81.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 279–80, my emphasis.

sively, paradigmatically, classically as event in Jesus Christ.”⁶⁴ He is good, in other words, at speaking of the general, fundamental, always-and-everywhere truth about the universe disclosed in Jesus but less good at tying that fast to the particularity of Jesus’ life lived within that universe.⁶⁵

Frei thus pushes us to ask the interlinked questions: Can Tracy’s theory allow talk about Jesus’ unsubstitutable particularity, and can it allow the unsubstitutable particularity to constitute, rather than simply to illustrate or point to the truth disclosed in Christian texts? For Frei, this is necessary if the texts are really to have the power of confronting us with Jesus Christ rather than ourselves writ large.

These questions are difficult to answer in *The Analogical Imagination*. In more recent years, however, Tracy has overcome this imbalance without any fundamental break in his hermeneutical procedures. As I quoted at the beginning of this article, Tracy has said, “I too have learned from the incomparable Hans Frei just how central [the] ‘plain sense’ should be,” and he seems to have learned precisely the importance of dwelling on the “history-like” and “realistic” plain sense of the gospel narratives (particularly the passion narratives) and their identification of Jesus through his unsubstitutable action and interaction.⁶⁶ A good example of this can be found in a 1991 article, “Approaching the Christian Understanding of God”:

For the Christian, God is the one who raised Jesus of Israel from the dead. God, for the Christian, is the one who revealed decisively who God is in and through the message and ministry, the incarnation, cross, and resurrection of none other than Jesus the Christ. The most profound New Testament metaphor for who God is remains the metaphor of 1John: “God is love.” . . . However, if this classic Johannine metaphor . . . is not grounded in and thereby interpreted by means of the stark reality of the message and ministry, the cross and resurrection of this unsubstitutable Jesus, who, as Christ, is God’s decisive self-disclosure as love, then Christians may be tempted to think that the metaphor is reversible into “Love is God.”⁶⁷

Here it is clear, I think, that Tracy does not start with the (penultimate) particularity of Jesus and move on to the (ultimate) general truth of agapic love, leaving the penultimate behind, but recognizes that the gen-

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 154–58 and 234 (my emphasis).

⁶⁵ It is perhaps this that lends initial weight to Frei’s criticism, for the concentration by Tracy on general, always already truth allows worldview to cohere directly with ethos (i.e., with dispositional terms) and makes all too easy the suspicion that “ethos” is the real referent.

⁶⁶ Tracy, “On Reading the Scriptures Theologically” (n. 3 above), p. 35; and Tracy, “Approaching the Christian Understanding of God” (n. 25 above), p. 137.

⁶⁷ Tracy, “Approaching the Christian Understanding of God,” p. 138.

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eral truth is constituted by reference to the particularity of Jesus, such that constant reference to that particularity is necessary. It is clear, in other words, that Tracy can, without a fundamental change in his hermeneutical framework, articulate a more fully incarnational christology.

Fundamental Questions and Tracy's Sensibility

Neither the claim that Tracy's use of hermeneutical theory is foundationalist nor the claim that he reduces the referent of the Gospel texts to modes of consciousness in opposition to the unsubstitutable action and interaction of the character Jesus of Nazareth, wholly works. We get closer to the heart of Frei's disagreement with Tracy if we turn to another set of issues: the relationship between "the logic of belief" and "the logic of coming to believe."

If we turn back to *The Analogical Imagination*, we find Tracy saying, "We are always already in the presence of an absolute mystery. . . . We are, therefore, in fact hearers of a *possible* revelation or self-manifestation from the freedom of the absolute mystery. . . . But for the Christian, that revelation (as self-manifestation of God) has in fact occurred in the free and decisive event called Jesus Christ—a position explicated in systematic theology."⁶⁸ If we read this in the light of the clarifications and refinements of Tracy's later work, we will not take it to mean that the truth disclosed in Jesus is in any sense separable from the narrative of his actions and interactions over time—it is not that Jesus is a secondary or unnecessary trigger who actualizes something that he does not constitute. Rather, with his talk of possibility, Tracy is wanting to say that there is something about human being (the proximity of "absolute mystery" to us) that makes the truth disclosed in Jesus of Nazareth potentially recognizable as a truth by any human being, even though that truth is inherently linked to the particularity of Jesus.

Tracy claims that this possibility/actuality structure to Christian truth can be understood in terms of "question" and "answer"; that the disclosure of truth in Jesus comes as a recognizable possibility because it acts as an answer to questions that human beings inevitably face.⁶⁹ That is, human beings are always faced by fundamental questions that open up at the limits and transitions of life (that is what it means to be faced by absolute mystery). This is an aspect of Tracy's work that goes back at least to *Blessed Rage for Order* (where it was absolutely central), which has continued as a backbone of his presentation ever since.

⁶⁸ Tracy, *AI*, p. 162.

⁶⁹ Possibility/actuality and question/answer are related in Tracy to the concrete/abstract scheme that we have already seen in operation in his analysis of Gadamerian hermeneutics.

I hope I have said enough above to make it clear that Tracy cannot be accused of a foundationalist straitjacketing of theology at this point. In this specific context, that can be reaffirmed when we notice three things. First, after *Blessed Rage for Order*, at any rate, Tracy's talk of question and answer becomes increasingly informal: it has broadened out from being a heavyweight transcendental analysis to being a far less monolithically theory-laden approach. Second, this is shown in the increasing diversity that Tracy has realized in the fundamental questions that people face. For instance, in 1989 he wrote:

Any human being can interpret the religious classics because any human being can ask the fundamental questions that the classics address. Among these questions are those provoked by radical contingency and mortality; questions evoked by the transience of all things human; questions attendant on an acknowledgment of the historical and social dependency of all values embraced and all convictions lived by; the question of suffering . . . the question of the meaning of an ennui that can erupt into a pervasive anxiety, even terror, in the face of some unnameable "other" . . . the question of why we sense some responsibility to live an ethical life . . . the question of why we might need to affirm a belief that there is some fundamental order in reality that allows scientific inquiry; the question of how to understand the oppression endured by so many of the living as well as the memory of the suffering of the dead.⁷⁰

Third, after *Blessed Rage for Order*, Tracy has described himself repeatedly (referring to H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*) as a "transformationist," and frequently affirmed that the questions that people bring to encounter with Jesus are decisively transformed in that encounter in unpredictable ways.⁷¹

However, even given these clarifications, Frei would remain uneasy with Tracy's approach. In a programmatic essay he wrote in 1967, we find Frei saying, "I believe that it is not the business of Christian theology to argue the *possibility* of Christian truth. . . . The possibility follows logically

⁷⁰ David Tracy, "Afterword: Theology, Public Discourse, and the American Tradition," in *Religion and Twentieth Century American Intellectual Life*, ed. Michael J. Lacey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 196–97. The list goes on for as long again as I have quoted.

⁷¹ For example, David Tracy, "Christian Faith and Radical Equality," *Theology Today* 34, no. 4 (1978): 371, "Responses to Peter Berger," *Theological Studies* 39, no. 3 (1978): 503, and "Particular Questions within General Consensus," in *Consensus in Theology? A Dialogue with Hans Küng and Edward Schillebeeckx*, ed. Leonard Swidler (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), pp. 33–39. Tracy's focus on christocentric "transformation" in interreligious dialogue is also important in this regard (see his *Dialogue with the Other* [n. 2 above], p. 95); David Tracy, "Practical Theology in the Situation of Global Pluralism," in *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge and James N. Poling (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 140, and "Kenosis, Sunyata, and Trinity" (n. 40 above), *passim*.

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as well as existentially from its actuality.”⁷² Partly, Frei’s criticism would be focused on the suspicion that Tracy’s argument about fundamental questions is an unconvincingly uniform description of the ways in which people come to belief.⁷³

Look at that . . . cumbersome heavy artillery of theological reflection about “man” and “human existence”, so characteristic of modern theology since 1700! What does it all amount to? And who is listening? Do we ever really know, no matter what anthropological method we employ, no matter to what sources of individual or cultural sensibility we appeal—do we ever really know or apprehend ourselves, our neighbors, or the process of history to be in real need of salvation? [Or he might have said: as faced with fundamental questions which are answered in Jesus?] . . . Do we ever find a negative or positive preparation for the gospel when we examine ourselves, our neighbors, the course of culture, directly?⁷⁴

Nevertheless, I suggest that it would be a mistake to assume that the difference between the two theologians came down to different lists of the ways of coming to believe or more and less sanguine assessments of the successes of modern apologetics. That is not the heart of the matter.

Frei’s main point about “possibility” and “actuality” is rather more direct. He states that the logic of belief (which it is the purpose of theology to explore) should not be dominated by the logic of coming to belief: the two are fundamentally different.⁷⁵ In the current context, even if Tracy were right in his analysis of fundamental questions, Frei would claim that the construal of Christian faith entirely as a response (even a transformative response) to the fundamental questions present to humanity at large is liable to be a *misconstrual* of the logic of systematic theology. In other words, even if Tracy’s line on fundamental questions is an adequate description of the logic of coming to believe, Frei would claim that the belief itself should not be understood purely or even primarily in terms of its relation to such fundamental questions.

However, I suggest that, just as Frei’s differences from Tracy were based in part in a certain sensibility, so Tracy’s focus on ultimate questions is part of a natural, largely unquestioned focus on the extraordinary as the site of religion’s and Christianity’s significance. It is at the limits of ordinary discourses and practices that the fundamental questions open up and from which the transformative answers of the Christian tradition are heard: in the emergence of the uncanny; the eruption of the *mysterium fascinans* and the *mysterium tremendum*; in the space beyond the ordinary

⁷² Hans Frei, “Remarks in Connection with a Theological Proposal,” in *TN*, p. 30; the paper was originally delivered in 1967.

⁷³ See, e.g., Frei, “Karl Barth: Theologian” (n. 29 above), pp. 175–76.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁷⁵ Frei, “Remarks in Connection with a Theological Proposal,” p. 30.

running of science or of morality; in the liminal situations created in ritual and liturgy; in the transgressive moves of parable and proclamation; in the disruptive arrival of the other: in short, in the diverse aspects of a religious dimension to life in which Christianity finds its primary home and starting point.⁷⁶ Fundamental questions are simply the diverse ways we have of pointing to this religious dimension, nothing more, and so it is natural that the Christian religion should be understood in terms of its transformative response to them.

THE ORDINARY AND THE EXTRAORDINARY

For Frei, one might well be brought to Christian faith through finding answers to fundamental questions, or through the shock of recognition, or through an event of disclosure. Nevertheless, he will not privilege such answers, shocks, and events in his account of what that Christian faith is; he will not take the liminal, the disruptive, and the uncanny as the primary or paradigmatic location of the religious. Rather, he privileges the enduring and evolving shapes of continuing practice, the habits and continuities of changing everyday interactions, and the structures and grammars of institutions and communities. This is not because he has an analysis by which to detect the eruption of a religious dimension within even these humdrum realities (Tracy would be there before him!) but because, according to his take on the Barthian *analogia fidei*, God by grace and through Word and Spirit draws the whole ordered, developing, ordinary life of the Christian community into (partial) correspondence with God-self, precisely as an ordered, ordinary reality. Frei is willing to focus on this and to explore it, even at the risk of paying less than due attention to the disruptive and the radical—although he is firmly convinced that Christian practice involves a pointing beyond itself to Jesus of Nazareth in a way that can regulate and judge it.

Tracy, on the other hand, focuses on the disruptive and challenging, the disquieting and fascinating power of God, emerging where the ordinary and banal gives way to something deeper, something uncanny. It may well be that such events of disclosure, such challenges and mysteries, emerge from within ongoing, regular practices of reading and listening, meeting and conversing, and Tracy is realistic about the persistent efforts of attention that this requires of us. He will not, however, tie his construal of religion and Christian faith to those things, for faith is about what transcends them. He is willing to focus on this disruptive power and the possibility it contains for transforming lives, families, communities, and institutions, even at the risk of paying less than due attention to the ordi-

⁷⁶ See, most recently, the preface to the 1996 reprint of Tracy, *BRO* (n. 40 above), p. xiii.

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nary and the repetitive, seeing that simply as the background against which the religious emerges—even though he is firmly convinced that the religious moment is firmly embedded in the lives of people and communities.

I suggest, therefore, that what in Tracy's work is inimical to Frei is not a nonexistent foundationalism nor a failure to speak of or to prioritize the particularity of Jesus Christ but a failure to do justice to the ordinary, the habitual, the quotidian within the logic of belief. It might be that it is Tracy's focus on this religious-as-limit dimension that gives rise to the impression that he is primarily concerned with people as consciousnesses: after all, fundamental questions are easiest to understand as disruptions or discontinuities in the conscious perspectives of human individuals. It might also be that the impression of a residual foundationalism springs from the same source: after all, even though for Tracy this construal of religion is as much derived from his schooling in the Christian tradition as in any form of secular philosophy, to someone with Frei's sensibility it is bound to look as if the privileging of fundamental questions is the result of a more or less philosophical analysis of religiosity prior to all engagement with theology. It might even be that the impression that Tracy has difficulty in sustaining a focus on the particularity of Jesus Christ stems from the same source: after all, for Frei this focus is articulated in terms of the ongoing reading of the Gospels in the Christian community, and the shapes of interpretation that are corporately nurtured and sustained, something that fits with more obvious ease into his take on Christianity's practical, social reality than into Tracy's articulation. Nevertheless, I hope I have made it clear that none of those secondary criticisms is, in fact, completely successful; I suggest that to the extent to which they remain outstanding issues between Frei and Tracy, they be seen as symptoms rather than as the heart of the matter.

In turn, I suggest that what is inimical to Tracy in Frei's work is not a refusal of correlation, nor a retreat into "confessionalism," but a failure to do sufficient justice to the radical, disruptive, and transgressive in Christian faith. It might be that it is Frei's focus on the quotidian regularity of religion that gives rise to the suspicion that he is uninterested in critical correlation: his understanding of the transformative and prophetic is firmly grounded in what he sees as the resources for regulation and critique embedded in ongoing Christian practice, and this is bound to look to Tracy insufficient for the radical questions Christians face. It might also be that it is this focus that gives rise to the impression that Frei is less interested in rigorous philosophical analysis than he should be: to one who is used to asking large-scale ontological and metaphysical questions, to dancing with Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur, the claim that these questions look odd when viewed from the scale of the ordinary and the

human is liable to sound weak. It might even be that it is this focus that gives rise to the impression that Frei is insufficiently interested in such things as interreligious dialogue: his interest in the details and configurations of ongoing Christian practice inevitably led him to focus his energies on the careful historical tracing of certain strands in the development of modern Western Christianity and theology, and although his work was extraordinarily wide-ranging within those constraints, it is bound to look somewhat parochial to someone of Tracy's interests and relationships. Nevertheless, I hope I have made it clear here as well that none of these secondary criticisms is, in fact, completely successful, and once again I suggest that, to the extent to which they remain outstanding issues between Frei and Tracy, they be seen as symptoms rather than as the heart of the matter.

Where does this leave us? It leaves us on the one hand with a challenge to those who follow Frei to make sure they do justice to the possibilities for truly radical transformation that inhere in Christian faith—possibilities that have shown themselves from time to time in the history of Christianity and are built in to the grammar of Christian faith in such a way that they call into question that very grammatical way of speaking about faith. Can they, once those possibilities have been more thoroughly exposed, show how they might be relevant to the serious dialogues with others to which the current situation of global pluralism calls them?

On the other hand, it leaves us with a challenge to Tracy to do justice to the ordinary and quotidian in the logic of Christianity: the extent to which Christianity is, in his terms, more than simply “religious.” Can he reformulate his hermeneutics in a way that allows the importance of his analysis of fundamental questions and the consequent public availability of theology but that does not let that analysis dominate or misrepresent the proper content of systematic theology or the actual shape of ordered and faithful living?

Perhaps such suggestions can begin to indicate a way beyond an impasse, a way in which Yale and Chicago might move closer together, through a more robust attention to the presence and mutual conditioning of both extraordinary and ordinary in Christian faith.