THEOLOGICAL TRUTH CLAIMS
BETWEEN METAPHYSICS AND MORALS

A Critique of Revisionist Attempts
to Ground Theological Truth Claims
in the Creative Imagination

Marcus G. Butler

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis and the research upon which it is based is my own work. All references to material other than my own have been fully annotated. Wherever possible the source of any argument that I have made use of has been identified and recorded.

Marcus G. Butler

ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with the nature of theological truth claims. The problem it addresses concerns what model of theological truth best allows for the comprehensiveness religious belief offers, without either superseding or being reduced to, a moral imperative. It focuses this concern upon an analysis of contemporary attempts to forge a middle-way between religion and ethics using the idea of the *creative imagination* as a critical theological principle. The thesis defends the viability of theological truth claims in the current epistemological situation, and argues that while *possibility* may be the key notion that distinguishes them, nevertheless, to rely upon the creative imagination as that critical principle by which theological truth claims are to be judged, is to risk privileging metaphysics over morals.

The thesis focuses upon two contemporary revisionist theologians - David Tracy and Stewart Sutherland - who both share a commitment to a 'mediating' role for theology in the current situation. It suggests that Tracy's understanding of a theological truth claim as the *imagined possibility of self-authenticity* founders upon the fact that art distances the individual from the existential moment wherein possibility becomes real, and therefore fails to demonstrate how possibilities-in-principle can become possibilities-in-fact. The thesis suggests by way of a contrast that Sutherland's understanding of theological truth as *lived possibility in the light of eternity* may escape some of the criticisms made of Tracy's model.

At the same time as being a critique of revisionist thought on theological truth claims the thesis offers itself as a contribution within revisionist theology, and supports the ideal of a publicly accessible theological truth claim. The substantive contribution that it offers is a warning against a model of theological truth that is over-dependent upon the idea that art is the one particular that has universal scope. The constructive elements of this critique are first, the suggestion that theological truth claims may more successfully bridge metaphysics and morals by deconstructing the idealised existence that the imagination presents us with, and second, that the legitimation of theological truth can best be achieved by employing a *phronesis* model of reason as a critical principle.

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INTRODUCTION

"The most evident bridge between religion and morality is the idea of virtue."
Iris Murdoch[1]

1. The argument of the Thesis

This thesis deals with a challenging question - "What does religion add to ethics?" Little explanation is needed to justify the importance of the question itself, for it has a long and venerable history in theology, and theologians have offered a variety of answers to it.[2] Though the question is a complex one and the options for answering it wide indeed, I have chosen it as the focus of this thesis. It could be asked why yet another contribution on this subject is needed. After all, what more can be said having read and absorbed Kant's, Otto's, Kierkegaard's or Tillich's considerable and brilliant renderings of the question? What more indeed, unless the 'more' we talk of, is a hermeneutical more, that sees in every new interpretation a *re*interpretation which opens up previously unimagined possibilities before us. The justification of my thesis lies herein. My hope is that in dealing with an old question in a new way, using new resources, a previously unimagined possibility emerges, and becomes real.

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[1] Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London, Chatto and Windus 1992), p.481. This book was based upon Iris Murdoch's 1982 Gifford Lectures given at the University of Edinburgh.

[2] Kant, for example, believed religion added an *unconditional demand* to ethics. Otto believed religion added a sense of the *numinous* to ethics, Tillich, the *depth dimension*, and Kierkegaard the possibility of *authenticity* in the face of the *teleological suspension of the ethical.*

The question "What does religion add to ethics?" is a question concerning the nature of theological truth claims. So what is a theological truth claim? Some will suggest that a theological truth claim is a truth claim that transcends reason through *faith*. When rationality exhausts itself, they will say, then faith begins, and theological truth claims are expressive of faith. This thesis agrees that theological truth claims are expressive of faith, but disagrees that such expressions can take leave of reason. In fact, I will argue, that when properly understood, faith *redirects* reason by the light of an ultimate goal, to be conducive towards the transformation of the human situation. This thesis suggests that to achieve this, theological truth must occupy the hinterland between metaphysics and morals. It understands metaphysics in terms of the ontological and universal hopes expressed in the *comprehensiveness* offered by a religious worldview, and morality as the imperative to act virtuously in the face of particularity. It is the central claim of the thesis that the expression of faith that theological truth claims represent, is the *imagined possibility of goodness*. My argument is that this understanding of a theological truth claim provides the best way of bridging metaphysics and morals. As the opening quotation to this introduction indicates, others, notably Iris Murdoch, have made similar claims. Although the conclusion of the thesis largely concurs with Murdoch, what keeps my argument firmly in the world of theology is the claim that the imagined possibility of goodness *is a gift that comes from without.*

Metaphysics and morals have always been concerns of religion but the

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relationship between them has at times been strained. This thesis closely scrutinises an idea that has gained a significant following in recent times, that art can be a theological *via media* between metaphysics and morals. That art should be suggested for such a role, is largely due to the influence of Kant's *Third Critique*.[3] In the *Third Critique*, art is seen as the one particular that has universal scope, and is successful in reconciling the realms of nature and freedom.[4] In possessing this capability, art has been taken to hold out the possibility of a way of making truth claims that satisfies *both* their particular context *and* their universal scope. If art does function in this manner it offers solutions to a number of questions that vex theologians. From questions about interpretation, to questions about pluralism and truth, art promises a way through many theological impasses. Nevertheless, the key question is to what extent art can yield a critical principle by which competing theological truth claims can be judged.

In this thesis we will examine how one stream of theology in particular has attempted to make the creative imagination a *via media* between metaphysics and morals. This idea suggests that the creative imagination holds the key to many of the problems facing theologians, through the imagined possibilities it

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[3] For a good account of Kant's aesthetic judgement see S. Körner, *Kant* (London, Penguin 1955), Chapter 8 "Kant's Theory of Aesthetic Taste", pp.175-195.

[4] "In carrying out his plan to unify or at least reconcile nature and freedom, Kant uncovered a priori elements in our judgements of the beautiful and the sublime in nature and in art." Lewis White Beck, ed., *Kant Selections* (London, Macmillan, 1988), p.332.

generates. I will argue that while the creative imagination is indeed a powerful tool for theology, it is questionable whether it can provide us with the critical leverage necessary to make the transformation of the human situation a *real* possibility unless a distinction is made between different types of imagined possibility. As we shall see, certain revisionist attempts to forge a *via media* using an understanding of theological truth as imagined possibility rely heavily upon the belief that an imagined possibility can do enough to turn a possibility in-principle into a possibility-in-fact. However, in this thesis I shall argue that, if left unfettered, the imagination is just as liable to produce *idealised* and consequently *false* possibilities, as real possibilities. I therefore advocate the centralisation of the imagined possibility of *goodness* in theological thought.

This thesis is a critique of one type of revisionist theology in particular. The strength of revisionist approaches lies in their commitment to the public availability of theological truth claims. In today's 'postmodern' and 'deconstructive' climate it seems increasingly necessary to defend the fact that theology can, and should, make publicly available truth claims. For some, as we shall shortly see, theology can apparently go happily on its way without justifying itself or its claims. This is not my belief, and is one of the reasons why I have chosen to locate the thesis in the revisionist school of theology, for revisionist theology is above all things concerned that theology should make

truth claims.[5]

What has come to be called the postliberal school of theology, is another contemporary movement that is also concerned with theological truth, and an overview of its claims are given in the first Chapter. There, it emerges that truth for postliberals need not be connected to *public* rationality. For postliberals, it is not of primary importance that theological truth claims are accessible in the broadest possible sphere. Postliberalism does have its own rationality, but it is of a type that does not offer theological truth the kind of public accessibility that it needs. Revisionist approaches in theology strive to make theological truth claims open to public scrutiny. They will not allow that theological truth claims have only a local and particular scope, or that they are justified only through authority. Revisionists argue that theological truth claims possess a universal scope and they are prepared to provide reasons to back up the viability and legitimacy of such claims. Revisionist approaches to theological truth are therefore critical approaches. The postliberal approach to theological truth does possess certain virtues, Lindbeck's as we shall see possesses the virtue of coherence. Nevertheless, insofar as theology is concerned with making theological truth claims publicly accessible and available to the widest possible audience, then it appears that in the contemporary scene revisionist approaches

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[5] 'Revisionism' is a term which is also applied within Marxist theory. See *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, ed. Alan Bullock and Oliver Stallybrass (London, Fontana, 1977), p.541. The kind of 'revisionism' this thesis purports to deal with is theological.

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are uniquely qualified for the task.[6] The strengths of revisionist theology are therefore many, however, the claim of this thesis is that when revisionist approaches focus on art as that which secures a public rationality, then the original intention of revisionists to articulate a *via media* between metaphysics and morals begins to err on the side of metaphysics to the detriment of morals. As we shall see, revisionists do assume that the realm of aesthetic experience has a publicness that qualifies it uniquely as a theological via media, but this thesis will reveal that such a belief is only adequate when the object of aesthetic experience is conceived as the imagined possibility of goodness.

While names such as Edward Farley, Gordon Kaufman, Schubert Ogden and David Tracy are thought to be the usual representatives of revisionist theology, the list can also be extended to include others, more likely to be described as liberal, like Bultmann, Tillich, Rahner and Schillebeeckx.[7] Despite the limitations of attempting to marry such a diverse group of thinkers under one heading, it is possible to identify a number of broad themes shared by all the above. In James J. Buckley's Chapter on "Revisionists and Liberals" in *The*

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[6] See David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (London, SCM Press Ltd., 1981), Part One, for an extensive debate on the question of publicness in theology; also Don S. Browning and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza ed., *Habermas, Modernity and Public Theology* (New York, Crossroads, 1982).

[7] See James Buckley's Chapter, in David F. Ford ed., *The Modern Theologians* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1997), p.327, for a good account of those theologians in the revisionist school. Buckley discusses revisionists and liberals in the same Chapter, and suggests that while revisionists try to shape Christian belief and practice *in dialogue with* modern philosophies, cultures and social practices, liberals on the other hand try to do so *on the basis of* modern philosophies, cultures and social practices.

Modern Theologians, it is suggested that four themes are held in common by all revisionists. These are:

> 1. A belief that, "Christian theology makes truth claims and provides reasons for its claims".
>
> 2. A concern with "human beings as free subjects embedded in a physical and social and historical world, radically threatened by ambiguity and suffering and evil, and seeking ways to overcome this situation".
>
> 3. An agreement that "the monarchical God of classical theism must be replaced by a God related to human, religious, or specifically Christian experience."
>
> 4. An agreement that "life and thought in relationship to the specific figure of Jesus is shaped by the previous issues."[8]

Using Buckley's four definitions of revisionist theology, I also find it possible to include the work of Stewart Sutherland under the label revisionist. Sutherland is a self-declared revisionist, although sometimes his use of the term carries connotations that Buckley does not include in his definitions, describing his approach as "revisionary rather than descriptive".[9] Nevertheless, with a tone that echoes David Tracy to the letter, he says,

> "A successful piece of revisionary work, as Schleiermacher clearly saw, will take account of the central questions posed by our culture to Christianity, and in so doing interrogate the presuppositions of that culture."[10]

David Tracy and Stewart Sutherland are the revisionist theologians that feature most prominently in this thesis. David Tracy has, in his numerous theological writings expressed his unfailing commitment to two fundamentals; firstly, that

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[8] Ibid., p.327.

[9] Stewart Sutherland, *God, Jesus and Belief* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1984), p.6.

[10] Ibid., p.16.

theology can and does make truth claims: and secondly, that such claims are open to critical revision in the broadest possible public sphere on the basis that "the truth claims of art and religion stand or fall together".[11] Stewart Sutherland, who shares many of Tracy's commitments, also adheres to much that characterises the revisionist agenda, though as we shall see, with less emphasis upon the centrality of art. In discussing the work of these two theologians I shall argue that, for Tracy, the critical principle of a theological truth claim may be understood in aesthetic terms, and thus what religion adds to ethics is an aesthetic and imagined possibility of self-authenticity. For Sutherland, on the other hand, theological truth must be understood in the light of the priority of moral beliefs over religious beliefs, and thus what religion adds to ethics is the imagined possibility of goodness.[12]

Talk of possibility immediately brings the imposing figure of Heidegger, and his theological disciple Rudolf Bultmann to mind. It can legitimately be argued that the outstanding theological contribution on possibility is indeed Bultmann's. For Bultmann possibility was the *key* distinguishing feature between theology and philosophy, where philosophy takes a possibility *in principle* to be already

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[11] David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination,* p.185 n.37.

[12] See Stewart Sutherland, *God, Jesus and Belief,* p.16, "A religious belief which runs counter to our moral beliefs is to that extent unacceptable."

a possibility-in-fact.[13] Though the questions he was concerned with run throughout this thesis, there is little mention of Bultmann himself in it. The simple reason for this being that my chosen focus has been on *contemporary* formulations of the problem.

2. Outline of Chapters

Theological truth claims have not fared well in modernity and in the first part of this thesis we shall examine why this has been the case. Nevertheless, in spite of the constraints placed by modernity upon theological truth claims, there has emerged a window of opportunity that now promises to allow theology to regain its voice in the contemporary conversation. Such an opportunity cannot be neglected if the mistakes of the past are not to be repeated. Consequently, the development of an understanding of a theological truth claim, which is both fully *theological* and open to critical evaluation as truth, is a fundamentally valuable project.[14] That this is a project with no guarantee of success cannot be denied, and as we shall see by Chapter Seven, is demanding of the highest of theological virtues; faith, hope and wisdom. In Part One, I therefore explore the

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[13] See Rudolph Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology" (1941), *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings* (London, SCM Press Ltd., 1985), tr. Schubert M. Ogden, pp.27ff.

[14] In the introduction to *The Promise of Critical Theology: Essays in Honour of Charles Davis* (Ontario, Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1995), ed. Marc P. Lalonde, Lalonde defines critical theology as, "a term which designates those theologies in constructive dialogue with the Marxist tradition of social criticism in general, and with the critical theory of the Frankfurt school (ie the work of Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse) and Jurgen Habermas in particular.", p.2.

opportunities that contemporary thinking on a number of issues might offer a nascent theological truth claim. The issues examined include the problems of foundationalism and incommensurability, the role of reason and the nature of religious language. Although all of these issues relate to the central thesis, the primary focus of Chapters One to Four is as a *defence* of the viability of theological truth claims.

In Chapter One I begin by discussing what kind of understanding of a theological truth claim can succeed in balancing the requirements of metaphysics and of morals, where the *comprehensiveness* that metaphysics offers often seems to militate against the *particularity* demanded of morals. With the question thus stated I explore those aspects of the contemporary situation that make an answer to the question possible in the context of a discussion about postmodernity. After outlining the postmodern critique of theological truth I explore postliberal and revisionist responses to it, and ask which offers us the most plausible model for an understanding of a theological truth claim in the current situation. By the end of this Chapter I establish my initial premise, where the notion of a *revisable* theological truth claim situated in a form of *public rationality* is one that can offer an understanding of theological truth between metaphysics and morals better than any contemporary alternatives.

With the main argument of Chapter One established, Chapter Two sets out to explore an alternative understanding of public rationality. The Chapter begins by

examining how the dominant form of reason in modernity has made the issue of public rationality so pointed, and explores the failure of instrumentalist notions of reason with respect to the cognitive claims of religion and modernity's own choice of a repository of ultimacy, the self. Next, it examines the idea of a *communicative rationality* found in the work of Jürgen Habermas. In this Chapter we ask how far communicative rationality allows theological truth claims the space to be revisable. The conclusion of the Chapter suggests that while the setting of theological truth claims within the context of a communicative rationality does offer theology some opportunities, nevertheless, it is questionable whether communicative rationality *by itself* can make theological truth revisable without recourse to an ultimate goal. Thus, I argue, communicative rationality needs the supplementation of an *eschatological* dimension to allow for the revisability of theological truth. Chapter Two, therefore, shows that neither instrumental nor communicative understandings of reason provide all that is needed for a response to the problems of modernity that may permit public theological truth claims.

In Chapter Three I argue that *faith* - that which theological truths are expressive of - is the principle of transformation which Habermas neglects to pay sufficient attention to. *Faith* succeeds in facilitating the radical transformation that Habermas hopes for, because it is focused upon an adequate goal. In making this claim it is nevertheless still incumbent upon me to show what form of rationality might legitimate such faith. Chapter Three sets out to do this by first examining

how faith can facilitate radical transformation without totalisation, i.e., the cognitive privilege of one truth over another. I then examine the way that *phronesis* models of rationality can help the legitimation of faith. It is therefore the argument of Chapter Three that if a theological truth claim is to prevent the loss of critical adjudication as truth, then it must adopt *phronesis* models of rationality.

Chapter Four brings the first part of the thesis to some kind of culmination by identifying the epistemological framework within which theological truth can best operate. This Chapter deals with the distinctiveness of theological truth in the context of a discussion concerning the resources in a renewed reading of a Kant. After exploring Kant's understanding of a theological truth claim, we next look at Adina Davidovich's claim that Kant in fact does *not* reduce religion to ethics, and explore the potential in her notion of religion *as a province of meaning*. My argument in this Chapter is that an understanding of religion as a province of meaning accords theological truth claims validity as claims about the *possible conditions of meaningfulness*. Theological truth claims need not be sacrificed on the altar of a fact/value dichotomy, and by using Adina Davidovich's reading of Kant,

> "theology need not detach itself from its foundation in human experience to secure a general audience",[15]

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[15] Adina Davidovich, "Kant's Theological Constructivism", *Harvard Theological Review,* 86:3 (1993), pp.323-351, p.351.

Consequently, the conclusion to Part One is to argue that religion can be said to represent a province of meaning that is distinct from ethics, and the making of theological truth claims in the contemporary situation is still a valid exercise. Nevertheless, in the light of Kant's *Third Critique* the province that religion occupies is that of the human imagination.

In Part Two of the thesis I attempt an exercise in theological constructivism. The question is no longer *whether* we are justified in talking of theological truth claims, but what exactly do we *mean* when we do so. It is the premise of the second part of the thesis that the virtues of *praxis* and *phronesis* highlighted in previous Chapters as desirable of theological truth in the contemporary situation, are acquired through the articulation of possibility. In Part Two I therefore explore the implications of focusing upon *imagined possibility*, as that which is most distinctive of theological truth claims. In Chapter Five, we explore Paul Ricoeur's idea of the imagined possibility of self-authenticity. Here, I argue that Ricoeur fails to distinguish between different types of imagined possibility, and consequently invests a great deal in believing that the imagined possibility of self-authenticity is sufficient for the transformation of the human situation from self-centredness to other-centredness. With this criticism made, we move on in Chapter Six to examine an explicitly theological appropriation of Ricoeur, in David Tracy. After exploring Tracy's theology generally, we identify the similar role that the imagined possibility of self-authenticity plays in it. Here I argue that Tracy make certain presuppositions about art that leaves his theological model,

unable to distinguish holiness from fanaticism. In Chapter Seven and the Conclusion to the thesis, I begin to offer a constructive suggestion for a renewed understanding of the imagined possibilities that theology might offer. In Chapter Seven I draw from Stewart Sutherland the idea that theological truth claims represent the possibility of a life of *holiness* lived *sub specie aeternitatus*. Here, I suggest that the type of imagined possibility that theological truth claims stand for is better thought of as the imagined possibility of *goodness* rather than the imagined possibility of self-authenticity. The problem this raises concerns the resources that the imagined possibility of goodness might have, that the imagined possibility of self-authenticity does not have. I therefore deal with this question in the Conclusion and follow Iris Murdoch in defending the primacy of the concept of the Good over other concepts. Here, I argue that the concept of goodness is not vulnerable to the vicissitudes of art in the same way that other concepts are.

To set up a 'straw man' only to be knocked down for the benefit of the aggressor has never been the intention behind the thesis. The strengths of revisionist approaches like Ricoeur's and Tracy's are many. In one light therefore, my conclusion need not necessarily be seen as inflicting irreparable damage to their position, but one which can be worked into their programmes in the future. My critique of revisionist approaches to ground theological truth claims in the creative imagination is not, in itself, a critique of the place that imagined possibility has in theology. It is merely the suggestion that some

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imagined possibilities are more likely to facilitate the transformation of the human situation than others. At the end of the thesis my constructive suggestion for an epistemological framework that might facilitate this is seen to lie in the adoption of *phronesis* models of rationality. There, I suggest that the strength of *phronesis* as an epistemological bridge between metaphysics and morals lies in it being a form of rationality which is itself a virtue.

PART ONE

THEOLOGY, TRUTH AND POSTMODERNITY

In the First Part of this thesis I explore the nature of truth claims in contemporary philosophy. According to many contemporary philosophers postmodernity has made truth vulnerable in previously unprecedented ways. Consequently, to make a truth claim at all has been seen to be an expression of power, an attempt to dominate or the will to subdue. As Michel Foucault has said,

> "What defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others... Instead it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, or existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future."[1]

The impact these insights have had upon theological truth claims has been immense. As a result theologians have been faced with a challenge. Some have responded by ignoring the insights that postmodernity affords us and have tried to go on making theological truth claims as if there was no doubt in anyone's mind as to what truth is. Others have sought to assimilate postmodern insights, and have been prepared to accept that the vulnerability of truth calls for new understandings of the nature of theological truth claims. For both of these groups postmodernity presents a challenge. For one it is a most unwelcome challenge that only offers danger, for the other it is an opportunity that promises to

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[1] Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power" Afterword to Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow ed., *Michel Foucault* 2nd Edition, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp.208-226, p220.

revitalise theology.

In Part One we will explore the challenge that the contemporary postmodern situation presents to theology. We shall examine the ways in which truth has become vulnerable in it and what kind of future theological truth has as a result. By the end of Part One it will be clear that I believe that theological truth does have a future. However, it is not a future that can ignore postmodernity, or its findings. Hence, the insights about the vulnerability of truth have to be recognised. Throughout Part One I shall highlight certain key notions. These represent the positive side of the challenge that the contemporary situation presents to theology and will reappear in Part Two in a more explicitly theological guise.

The most significant insights disclosed by postmodern thinkers about truth focus on an apparently unbridgeable gap between metaphysics and morals. Chapter One therefore opens by discussing this problem.[2] The *comprehensiveness* offered by religion often seems to militate against the *particularity* demanded of morals. As we shall shortly see, Abraham's call to sacrifice his son Isaac is

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[2] The literature on metaphysics is as vast as the subject itself. For a lucid treatment of the problem of metaphysical realism. See, Hilary Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face* (Cambridge, Mass; Harvard University Press, 1992). Metaphysics is most generally discussed in connection with theology, in terms of realism and anti-realism. Although that debate is of concern in my thesis, I have tried to avoid allowing it to dominate. Consequently, the term 'metaphysics' is used in this thesis in a non-technical way, and is intended to denote that type of universal ontology that theological truth claims often naively endorse which is to the detriment of moral action.

an example, if perhaps an extreme one, of this conflict. The most pressing question facing theology today therefore concerns whether a theological truth claim can allow for the comprehensiveness that religion provides without either becoming a moral imperative, or seeking to supersede a moral imperative. In Chapter One I explore those aspects of the contemporary situation that provide the best way forward for theology in the light of this problem. After outlining the postmodern critique of theological truth I explore two responses to it in the forms of *postliberal* theology and *revisionist* theology, and ask which offers us the most plausible model for an understanding of theological truth in the light of the problem. By the end of this Chapter both the field of reference for the exploration of the question and my initial premise are established; where the notion of a *revisable* theological truth claim situated in a form of *public rationality* is argued at the outset, to be one that promises to maintain some kind of balance between metaphysics and morals.

CHAPTER ONE

THEOLOGICAL TRUTH BETWEEN
METAPHYSICS AND MORALS?

"The real subject is the ethically existing subject." Søren Kierkegaard[3]

"Christianity is *praxis,* a character task."   Søren Kierkegaard[4]

1. Between Metaphysics and Morals: A Theological Truth Claim?

In the Presidential address to the American Academy of Religion in 1989, Huston Smith explored the relationship between postmodernism and religion.[5] Smith made the claim that modernity has interpreted religion without reference to its transcendent dimension. The dominant model of modernist ontology, being linear, one-dimensional and horizontal, meant that the extra dimension of religious ontology was uninterpretable. According to Smith, the failure of modernism to make sense of this dimension has thus led to the frustrated contradictions of phenomenological philosophy of religion.

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[3] Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1941), tr. D F. Swenson and W Lowrie, p.281.

[4] Cited in David J. Gowens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.28.

[5] See Huston Smith, "Postmodernism's Impact on the Study of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58 (1990), pp.653-670, p.653. According to Smith the change that postmodernism makes to modernity's rejection of hierarchical ontology is not to return to transcendence, but to resist the idea that reality can be wholly explicable.

The central posit of religion for Smith, is the notion of a hierarchical universe. Nevertheless, Smith argues that the way that modernity has dealt with religious ontology is to make suspect this hierarchical dimension. Modernity has preserved the notion of ontology *within* an empiricist, scientistic framework and has rejected a transcendent hierarchical ontology ie. *meta*-physics. Smith concludes his address by quoting from Darrol Bryant,

> "The problem with the modern study of religion is that it unfolds with a **modern** view of reality that is, in principle, hostile to the truth known in religion. For in the modern view reality is wholly explicable from within, there is no Beyond that must be appealed to understand what is.... How then can we understand religion when the implicit ontology, or view of things that we bring to the study of religion rules out a priori the ontologies of the religious traditions within which religion unfolds?"[6]

On balance Smith is optimistic about the future because science itself has exposed the bankruptcy of reductionism, and therefore raises the possibility that religion is meaningful. Consequently, it is legitimate to see the religions of the world as traditions of *wisdom*, that point to, and bear evidence of, a hierarchical ontology. In Smith's view, in spite of the inhospitable context that modernity has created, religion is still worth learning from.

I also believe that religion is still worth learning from and that modernity has railroaded religion into a subjectivist ghetto. In doing so it has impoverished the cultures we live in by denying any real validity to the traditions of wisdom that can help put moral flesh on the bare skeleton of human existence. I also believe

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[6] Darrol M. Bryant, "To hear the stars speak: Ontology in the Study of Religion(s)" in *Fragments of Infinity: essays in religion and philosophy* (Dorset, Prism, 1991), ed. A Shamra, pp.46-62.

that theology can be the interface between the flesh and the skeleton, and can function as the medium through which the wisdom of religion is expressed.

Like Smith also, I believe the postmodern climate we live in to be a constructive one for theology. The old, modern 'knock-down' criticisms of religion no longer have the same impact, and we have discovered that clear-cut secularist rebuttals are not sufficient. For today, we (rightly) expect our intellectual probings to be more nuanced. Today we have a justified suspicion of the invasiveness of theory and the corrupting tendencies of method. Today, we are acutely aware of the need to respect the integrity and truth value of the object of our attention, while recognising that the very process of attending can never be neutral. Today in the postmodern context we find ourselves in, we are even coming to recognise that the limitations of reason are something that religion has, at the very least, been conscious of for a long time. Nevertheless, the key question is to what extent postmodernity can allow for a return of theological *truth* claims.

The central problem facing theological truth claims, as we shall gradually come to see in the course of this thesis, is how to provide an understanding of theological truth which marries the idea that religious belief is *both* something that helps make comprehensive sense of the world *and yet* is something which is neither reducible to a moral imperative, nor something which supersedes a

moral imperative.[7] This is the problem the thesis seeks to address. That religion occupies the role of providing a comprehensive worldview is clearly the case. This is in fact what has made religion so problematic for modernity, where, as we shall see, comprehensiveness and totalisation have been linked together.[8]

Nevertheless, it is precisely here that postmodernity has licensed us to rethink our understanding of what it means for something to be comprehensive.[9] The comprehensiveness that religious belief once stood for was of a type that brooked no disagreement and generated no dialogue. Theological truth claims were once thought to possess privileges other truth claims did not have. 'Revelation' was the means by which such privilege was justified, but this idea was not exclusively borne out of religion alone. The idea of a truth that could have privileged access to reality has not only been a temptation for theologians, but can be found throughout the history of philosophy. In both theological and philosophical versions of it, the idea of a truth that possesses privileged access,

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[7] As we shall see, these are two of Stewart Sutherland's criteria for assessing any system of belief. See, *God, Jesus and Belief* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1984), pp.16-17.

[8] We shall explore this question further in Chapter Five, where we discuss what kind of understanding of theological truth can permit us to defend its comprehensiveness yet deny that it needs to have *cognitive privilege* over other truth claims. My suggestion will be that an understanding of reason as a *phronetic-sense making* activity can help to overcome this problem.

[9] David Tracy's approach to theological truth is a good example of one that has taken up the opportunities postmodernism has to offer, and will be subjected to analysis in this thesis, "postmodern hermeneutics is the test of any interpretation of any religion; at the same time, religion, as the most pluralistic, ambiguous and important reality of all is the best test of any theory of interpretation". See David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (London, SCM Press Ltd., 1987), p.ix.

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relies upon an understanding of truth as universal adequacy, and is premised upon the argument that, if true at all, a thing must be true in all particular instances of itself or not at all. In the case of religion those that disagreed with the theological truth claims of the ascendent powers, were not only wrong - for this kind of truth allowed for no nuances of certainty - they were *evil*. Consequently, a theological truth sadly became something which - by virtue of it being true in all particular instances of itself - was something that was worth destroying for.

Thankfully truth can now be thought of in less oppressive ways. Postmodernity offers us an understanding of truth as *relative* adequacy that need not involve the totalisation or privileged access, of other understandings of truth. With this understanding of truth postmodern forms of thought have created a context within which *theological* truth claims can prosper. Using the vocabulary of postmodernity Tracy, for example, can say that theological truth claims are paradigmatically *hermeneutical*. He can say that theological truth claims are comprehensive in a *dialogical* sense, allowing for many participants and possible disagreements. That they do not provide a neat linear progression from known to known, but a wandering, vagrant therapy, through a variety of only partially adequate truths, that point towards the *possibility of a different way of life*. This understanding of theological truth makes much sense of the way religion often functions in the life of the individual believer. For most believers religion offers more than just a philosophy of life, religion offers a total way of *being*. Such a

total way of being, is furthermore, one in which there is a *creative moment* that reveals previously hidden *possibilities*. Consequently, theological truth claims function as articulations of *possible ways of being*. In this thesis we will be examining, and eventually questioning, how far a model of theological truth as relative adequacy - premised upon the idea that the creative imagination is the critical theological principle - is sufficient with respect to the question of how a possible way of being in principle can become a possible way of being in fact. Nevertheless, at the outset it is my claim that such a model at the very least promises us a way of marrying the comprehensiveness that religion provides, with the ideals of pluralism and tolerance.

A theological truth claim is therefore something that helps us make sense of the world in which we live. It provides comprehensiveness, but it must be a form of comprehensiveness that is *revisable*. Theological truth claims are conversational, but not *all* forms of conversation are desirable. Similarly not all comprehension-providing beliefs are worthwhile. Theological truth claims therefore need to be submitted to a test, and the test is that of morality. Consequently, a theological truth claim is viable only insofar as it does not run counter to a moral belief.[10]

Again, justification for this claim is not hard to find. The paradigm religious case

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[10] See Stewart Sutherland, *God, Jesus and Belief*, p.16.

of the dilemma facing Abraham in his call to sacrifice his son, is a vivid illustration of the point; the will of God or the moral sense of man? Metaphysics or morals? Religion or ethics? But does the choice need to be so stark? Does one have to be resolved into the other? Does the comprehensiveness religion offers have to be sacrificed in the interests of morality, or does morality have to be sacrificed in the interests of maintaining comprehensiveness? Does the understanding of a relatively adequate theological truth claim, which insists that it is acceptable only insofar as it does not run counter to a moral belief, inevitably have to translate into saying that a theological truth claim is merely an injunction to strive to be moral and thus reduce religion to ethics? Or does it *add* something that makes a moral life more attainable?

This is at the heart of the problem with theology in the contemporary situation. My answer is yes, theological truth claims add something to morality, and no, it is not inevitable that religion is reduced to ethics. This thesis claims, that what religion *adds* to ethics is something that makes the moral life more attainable, but that what is added is not something which can be reified into a metaphysical claim that privileges itself over ethics. What religion adds to ethics is the possibility of an authentic life and *does* lead to theological truth claims that function as comprehensive world-views, but the key ingredient of such claims is not the reality they *point to* but the *life they issue in*.

The question of religion between metaphysics and morals is demanding of urgent

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consideration and has become acute in the contemporary context. Indeed it is the contemporary context that in largely unprecedented ways has allowed for a more vigorous philosophical defence of the viewpoint I shall be representing than ever before. For, to a large extent, the apparent *conflict* between religion and ethics that necessitated the reduction of one to the other has been brought about by a commitment to certain philosophical premises that have lost some of their credibility in postmodernity. Though this loss has also had some adverse affects on theologians, the opportunities that it brings with it are more numerous than the disadvantages. We shall briefly look at these now.

2. Foundationalism: The Agony and the Ecstasy of Postmodernism

The impact, and precise nature of postmodernity itself, is of course extensively debated. In *Anglo-American Postmodernity: Philosophical Reflections on Science, Religion and Ethics,* Nancey Murphy suggests that modern thought has been characterised by three interrelated philosophical positions; foundationalism in epistemology, representationalism or referentialism in language, and atomism and reductionism in metaphysics.[11]

Murphy's third characteristic, "atomism and reductionism in metaphysics", is perhaps the most significant of all. With it she suggests that modern science has progressed with at least three forms of reductionism, ontological (which reduces

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[11] See Nancey Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity: Philosophical Perspectives on Science, Religion and Ethics* (Colorado, Westview Press, 1997), p.8.

complex entities to simple entities, and militates against the possibility of mind/body dualism); causal reductionism (which assumes that causality works from the bottom-up); and methodological reductionism (which insists on an analysis of any entity in terms of its parts rather than as a whole). Metaphysical atomism-reductionism, therefore involves the overriding assumption that the nature of any entity is determined in the first instance by the parts that make up the whole, and not the other way around.[12]

The impact of the reductionism of science upon theological truth claims, is of course a well-rehearsed debate by now. Anyone that begins the task of exploring religion at all will soon discover a number of conflicting definitions, and quickly become conscious of the difficulty involved in reducing it to only one. While this awareness can lead to the conclusion, that the truth of religion must be reduced to the positivist methodology of the interpretative approach used to investigate it, others refuse to accept that reductionism does justice to the actual meaningfulness of religion and will therefore defend the view that religious truth claims are *transcendent*. The question then becomes polarised between those that believe a theological truth claim is a truth claim about what it is to be *human*, and those that believe it is a truth claim about *God*. But is such a forced choice necessary? Why can a theological truth claim not be about both? It is ultimately reductionism that forces this choice upon us, and, as Murphy rightly observes,

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[12] Ibid., p.14.

its exposure can aid us in articulating a model of theological truth that allows for a more balanced metaphysics.

The problem of epistemological foundationalism therefore relates closely to the question of metaphysics. The critique of foundationalism is a critique of everything that would ground human experience in such a way as to negate all creative freedom, and as such is a critique of certain understandings of metaphysics.[13] It perhaps offers theology more agony than ecstasy, though as we shall see in Chapter Five, deconstructionist theologians argue that some form of intelligible 'mystical ecstasy' is precisely what the foundationalist critique of metaphysics bequeaths to us. Nevertheless, the criticism that metaphysics is fundamentally foundationalist and prevents the development of human potential before it has begun, is not without purchase power. As Fergus Kerr says,

> "The desire to bring the passing show to a halt, to secure it to immoveable objects, lies deep in the metaphysical tradition. From Plato's forms to Bertrand Russell's atomism there is a powerful inclination to get up or down to something simple and ultimate: that which defies all further analysis, something self-sufficient and elemental."[14]

W V. Quine and Richard Rorty are the main sources for the philosophical critique of foundationalism. Quine's article "Two Dogmas of Empiricism", was an early attempt to discredit the idea that a statement had to be reducible to

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[13] The question of metaphysical realism will occur again in Chapter Seven. Suffice to say that metaphysics can be thought of in *realist* terms, *critical/non realist* terms, and explicitly *anti-realist* terms.

[14] Fergus Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986), p.62.

terms that referred directly to immediate experience for it to be meaningful.[15]

Quine therefore presented an understanding of knowledge as 'web-like'. It was

an understanding of knowledge in which there were no *unrevisable* beliefs, but

only degrees of difference between different beliefs over how *far* a belief was

from its horizon in immediate experience.[16] The 'web' metaphor for truth in

Quine was also linked to the idea of holistic truth, and suggested that truth was

not so much something that *corresponded* with a reality *external* to the web, but

was *coherence within* it.

Richard Rorty's more recent contribution to the question of foundationalism has

further developed some of Quine's ideas, and explored the way that knowledge

has been believed to mirror reality without distortion.[17] Although Rorty

identifies the origins of foundationalist thinking as early as Plato, it is with

Descartes that foundationalism entered its prime. Rorty believes that the mirror

metaphor for knowledge ought to be abandoned and replaced with the idea of

knowledge as a 'conversation'.[18] Knowledge in this model, is more like a therapy

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[15] See W V. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" *Philosophical Review* 40 (1951), pp.20-43.

[16] See W V. Quine and J S. Ullian, ed. *The Web of Belief,* 2nd edition. (New York, Random House, 1978).

[17] See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N.J; Princeton University Press, 1979).

[18] D Z. Phillips parts company with Rorty's when he says that, "The hidden values of hermeneutics are not the necessary consequences of exposing the defects of foundationalism. The postulate of exposing the hermeneutic conversation is prescriptive, and there is no reason why religious believers should follow the prescription." D Z. Phillips, *Faith after Foundationalism* (Colorado, Westview Press, 1988), p.xv.

that cures itself of its own ills. Rorty repeatedly draws on three philosophers (Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Dewey) whom, he claims, unitedly set aside the Cartesian notion of mind. Rorty claims that the distinctive and separate existence of something mental is dependent upon the notion of "phenomenal entities", which is in turn dependent upon the belief that something metaphysical informs the human consciousness. Rorty argues that Descartes used the notion of the "incorrigibly known" to bridge the gap between the intentional and the phenomenal, and thereby introduced the idea that the mind has privileged access to an incommunicable entity. Such an idea is anathema for Rorty, and is demonstrative of the kind of epistemological foundationalism that has lured philosophy into a false confidence. In rejecting it, Rorty urges us to abandon the quest for an absolute truth which has universal adequacy, and rest content with relative and only partially adequate truths.

With Rorty, the childlike confidence that there is a Truth outside the contingencies of space and time has been shattered.[19] Rorty also shows us how the problems of epistemological foundationalism lead on to the further problem

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[19] Rorty is often criticised for having abandoned ethics and encouraged a slide towards ethical relativism, nevertheless, in fairness to him it has to be said that the hermeneutic model is not without a moral agenda (of a type), since improvements in our human situation do occur, albeit as a result of the free creation of new meaning by the diverse use of language. It is the occurrence of differences in linguistic behaviour and the new vocabularies that are formed as a result that are the principle engines of personal transformation. Whether such a moral agenda is sufficient for real transformation is open to question? Can Rorty's version of hermeneutics provide us with a principle of *criticism* with which we can judge between interpretive practices? Or must Rorty's position slide into an epistemological relativism that abandons all critical leverage to the wind and relies on ethnocentric criteria of judgement?

of linguistic representationalism. Nancey Murphy endorses a Rortian point of view when she says,

> "The referential theory of meaning in philosophy of language is the equivalent of foundationalism in epistemology: Referentialism is not merely a parallel to foundationalism, it is an integral part of the modern epistemological project itself".[20]

The critique of foundationalism is therefore also a critique of the idea that language is a perfectly neutral medium that can act in a foundational way. It is a critique of the idea that words are transparent upon reality and represent that to which they refer, without distortion. This was the idea that positivism tended to rely upon, believing that language was thought to map reality, on a one-on-one basis. But the critique of foundationalism has raised suspicions over whether language works like this. It has exploded once and for all the idea that there are inviolable propositions, but even more problematically has led to the issue of *incommensurability*. It is the idea that, it is not simply the *means* of our expression that might be incommensurable with one another, but that the actual *contents* of our expression might be incommensurable with one another, that makes incommensurability so problematic. For the problem of incommensurability suggests that *conceptual schemes* might be irreconcilably different from one another![21] This idea has captivated thinkers for a long time

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[20] Stanley Hauerwas, Nancey Murphy and Mark Nation ed., *Theology Without Foundations: Religious Practice and the Future of Theological Truth,* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1994), p.14.

[21] As we shall see in Chapter Two, Donald Davidson does not accord any credibility to the idea that conceptual frameworks can be radically incommensurable, and thus offers theologians the possibility of non-exclusive theological truth claims. For Davidson, interpretative practice always involves us in a number of *true* beliefs.

now. Its negative side, as we shall see in a later Chapter, issues in an unnecessary scepticism which contradicts the very notion of a *symbol*, and ends in an epistemological relativism which negates *any* attempt at a truth claim. However, its positive side has been to pursue the idea that human knowledge, while being fundamentally conditioned by the act of *interpretation*, need *not* result in the denial of all claims to truth. As David Tracy says,

> "Interpretation seems a minor matter, but it is not. Every time we act, deliberate, judge, understand or experience, we are interpreting. To understand at all is to interpret. To act well is to interpret a situation demanding some action and to interpret a correct strategy for that action. to experience in anything other than a purely passive sense (a sense less than human) is to interpret and to be "experienced" is to be a good interpreter. Whether we know it or not, to be human is to be a skilled interpreter."[22]

As Fergus Kerr notes, it was with the expansion of ethnography and social anthropology in the wake of European colonisation of the rest of the world, that the reality of interpretation and the idea that our conceptual frameworks might be incommensurable, began to take hold.[23] Both negatively and positively, the idea that real communication between different human cultures could be an illusory myth, has exercised considerable power. In the main, as Hilary Putnam notes, the prevalent view had previously been that interpretation was "something second class".[24] Admittedly, interpretation was a lens, but it was a dirty, disfiguring lens, the accuracy of which could not be trusted. But today, the

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[22] David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity,* p.9.

[23] See Fergus Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein,* p.105.

[24] Hilary Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge, Mass; Harvard University Press, 1990), p.131.

critique of foundationalism has placed the problem of interpretation in the premier league. Today, interpretation has becomes neither merely second class, nor a morally neutral medium, it is for the postfoundationalist mind, the nearest thing to reality we can hope for. As Donald Davidson puts it, in interpretation we seek to come out "believers of truth and lovers of the good".[25]

Many of the problems connected to linguistic representationalism and incommensurability come from Wittgenstein. The early Wittgenstein's work consisted of an attempt to establish a working distinction between meaningful and non-meaningful language. Wittgenstein wanted to establish conditions for meaning in language and the *Tractatus* argued that words denote objects, and carry meaning because the structure of a sentence can be believed to reflect the structure of reality.[26] Although this did not apply to ordinary language - the logical constants 'on', 'not', 'if', do not denote objects - nonetheless, language reveals to us certain elementary structures that directly relate to the structure of reality.

The early Wittgenstein therefore offered a way to make judgements about legitimate and illegitimate uses of language (which is what positivism took from him), but also offered us a means by which we can escape language to have

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[25] Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984), pp.183-198.

[26] See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), tr. D F. Pears and B F. McGuinness.

knowledge about that to which language refers. After completing the *Tractatus,* Wittgenstein left philosophy apparently dissatisfied, no doubt conscious of the severe limitations his work placed upon whole fields of enquiry represented by religion, art and ethics. However, if the early Wittgenstein's work made it possible to step outside language and legislate for appropriate and inappropriate uses, in later writings Wittgenstein reversed this view. As emphatically as Kant once declared "sapere aude", in Wittgenstein's later work we find the insistent claim "Worte sind Taten", words are deeds.[27] The later Wittgenstein argued that we *cannot* stand outside language; that sentences do not have meaning because they refer to a reality outside their use, but that they have meaning through association with an *action* instead of a mental *idea*. Moreover, the later Wittgenstein placed philosophy itself in an altogether different context. In the later Wittgenstein the problems of philosophy are seen as originating with the displacement or "holidaying" of words,

"Denn die philosophischen Probleme enstehen, wenn die Sprache feiert."[28]

As well as providing us with a fundamentally new way of understanding language as inherently related to the community of language *users*, Wittgenstein's appeal to practice also emphasises that the claim that religious language is necessarily confused, is wrong. Such a claim is in fact a demonstration of the way that practice has been *ignored*. Consequently, in

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[27] See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1953), ed. G E M. Anscombe and R. Rhees, tr. G E M. Anscombe, p.546.

[28] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p.19.

stressing the practice of langauge use in this way, Wittgenstein helps us call into question the modernist assumption that religion is an outmoded way of thinking *and* that theological truth claims must inevitably be reduced to ethics. If the task of philosophy is, as Wittgenstein claims, to reflect the *use* of language, and keep from interfering with it as much as possible, then the claim that theological language is *necessarily* confused, demonstrates that the ideal of this task has not been attained.

Some have understood Wittgenstein's religious point of view to suggest that theological truth claims can only be understood in the context of the Wittgensteinian notion of a 'language game', and as a 'form of life'.[29] In essence such understandings take certain key themes from the later Wittgenstein, and argue that theological truth claims are not open to criticism from outside the culture they arise in, because a culture, as a form of life, has its own internal set of linguistic rules. Religious discourse can consequently be seen as the internal language of a form of life. As we shall shortly see, this idea is of vital importance in the approach of one particular theological response to the issue of foundationalism. Whether theological approaches such as these have interpreted Wittgenstein correctly is a hotly debated question. Kerr's *Theology After Wittgenstein* is at pains to argue that, serious as Wittgenstein's philosophical

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[29] This issue is clearly connected to the still-popular debate over Wittgensteinian fideism. The primary text on this debate remains Kai Nielson's "Wittgensteinian Fideism" *Philosophy* 42 (1967), pp.206-238. Further discussion is also found in Kai Nielson's *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Macmillan, London, 1982).

intentions were, it was never his intention to apply the notion of a 'form of life' ("eine Lebensform"), to religion, even though others have been inspired along those lines.[30] To use Wittgenstein's notion of "eine Lebensform", in relation to religion is to go far beyond Wittgenstein's use of the term. Furthermore, the notion that a language game functions in *isolation* from others cannot be argued to have any basis in Wittgenstein. For Wittgenstein, a game was not meant to be something which connoted triviality, and thus the suggestion that a 'form of life' can be assimilated within some kind of relativist perspective is mistaken.[31]

A more legitimate way to view Wittgenstein's religious point of view is, as Kerr points out, to see his critique of language as an attempt to set the boundaries of the sayable, with the intention of defining the unsayable more clearly.[32] The fact that Wittgenstein chose the primary classic of Western Christianity - St Augustine's *Confessions* - to open the *Philosophical Investigations* with, goes some way to establish his religious point of view. Kerr argues that the role that Augustine's picture of the child learning language plays in the *Philosophical Investigations* is as a picture of an individual with two languages. One is un-

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[30] Bertel Wahlstrom, *Religious Action, a Philosophical Analysis* (Abö, Abö Akademis Förlag, 1987), for a discussion of the nature and distinctiveness of religious action inspired largely by Wittgenstein's work.

[31] In a meeting with Fergus Kerr (12/11/96), he suggested that this mistaken reading of Wittgenstein can lead to the kind of error found in Don Cupitt's work as well as Michael Dummett, and that a better reading of Wittgenstein on this question is to be found in Stanley Cavell. See Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1979).

[32] See Fergus Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein*, pp.38-42.

useable because the individual is in an alien land which does not speak his tongue. The other is being learnt anew. The importance of this picture is however, as an example of the epistemological predicament of the *self*. Therefore, whatever else is meant by it, Wittgenstein's religious point of view included an overwhelming critical interest in the philosophy of psychology, and the theological conception of the self that had dominated Western thought.

Those who insist on applying Wittgensteinian ideas to religion are usually theologians who are securely rooted in one religious tradition, and seem to develop an approach which denies that an Archimedean point of reference *outside* of any religious tradition or culture, is at all possible. This consequently raises a serious question over what *criticism* can mean in such approaches. They are also flawed with respect to the fact that religious believers do not often share the same understanding of their religion as the Wittgensteinian interpreters. Religion is indeed, in some sense, a 'form of life', but it is seldom a game. Consequently, if the principle consequence of approaches concerned to employ Wittgensteinian insights is, as I have suggested it to be, a denial of the possibility of religious pluralism, then they become difficult to reconcile with the *universal* ambitions of most religions.

On closer examination, difficulties also emerge with Wittgenstein's own understanding of the task of philosophy. His appeal to practice may in the end even be thought to *constrain* any attempts to reform, or revise practice. If the

task of philosophy *is* simply to reflect without distortion, then the question that is raised concerns how any real criticism occurs. Where is the critical leverage in Wittgenstein's philosophy? Wittgenstein himself seemed to assume that the primitive, pre-reflective nature of practice, would in the end be conducive to human flourishing, but this is a big assumption. Furthermore, we could ask how a Wittgensteinian model of religion can distinguish between religious practice and merely superstitious practice? Using Wittgenstein, how can we argue that the celebration of the Eucharist is any better, or worse, than a Satanic ritual, or a revived Druidic celebration?

The best that we can take from Wittgenstein is an awareness of words as epistemic practices, within which the notion of action is central. He (rightly) suspends the necessity of a simple choice between metaphysical realism and anti-realism, and provides a conceptual framework which does not insist on establishing the nature of that which is described, before an epistemic claim can be deemed valid. This may assist us in understanding the relationship between religion and ethics as mutually open to revision, but it should not be used as a new argument for non-public theological truths claims. The agony of postmodernity goes deeper than the Wittgensteinians think.

We have so far sketched some of the problems postmodernity presents for theological truth claims. Though they are considerable, they are, I would suggest, outweighed by the opportunities that postmodernity affords theological truth. It

seems that modernity forced upon all who would sincerely consider the meaningfulness and rationality of theological truth claims a choice between two models, where either the rationality of theological truth claims must be judged according to criteria of rationality *external* to the culture that those claims are made within, or judged according to criteria of rationality *internal* to the culture that they are made within.[33] But the impossibility of such a stark choice is seen in the fact that externalist approaches risk *reducing* theological truth claims to the allegedly detached criteria of rationality held to be foundational for *all* truth claims, whereas internalist approaches on the other hand, risk *elevating* theological truth claims, to the point where theological propositions themselves become inviolable, and faith alone becomes the ultimate guarantor. Both approaches therefore risk *complying* with foundationalism in different ways. The externalist approach risks making criteria of rationality that are successful in one sphere of experience, foundational for a different sphere of experience, while the internalist approach risks making *faith* foundational as criteria for the rationality

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[33] Nancey Murphy argues in *Anglo-American Postmodernity*, p110, that postmodernism presents theological truth claims with a forced choice between Scripture and experience as a foundation for theological method. She argues that scriptural foundationalism involves propositionalist understandings of language, and fails to acknowledge the way that language interacts with other aspects of living, consequently criticism under this model can only ask how far any theological truth measures up to the accepted interpretations that the sect, cult or religion, has authorised of their scriptures. Criticism cannot extend to the interpretations of scriptures other than the sect's own, nor can it even justify the uniqueness of its own scriptures. Experiential foundationalism on the other hand means that different sects, cults or religions, do at least have the possibility of critically evaluating each other's theological truth claims since they have a common basis in the nature of universal religious experience. Nevertheless experiential foundationalism involves expressivist understandings of language, and consequently deprives truth claims based on theological language - as mere symbolic expressions of religious experience - of the certainty of other truth claims, and consequently risks the meaningfulness of criticism altogether.

of theological truth claims.[34] While both approaches risk different kinds of foundationalism, the internalist approach seems also wedded to the added problem of fideism.[35] What the awareness of epistemological foundationalism, linguistic representationalism and metaphysical reductionism constructively does for us, is increase our awareness of the *possibility of alternatives* beyond this impasse. And it is because theological truth claims are intimately connected with the generation of possibility that we can interpret postmodernity with hope. Postmodernity can offer theological truth claims a context wherein rationality is *both* internal *and* external.

3. Postliberalism versus Revisionism: A Coherent Truth or a Correlated Truth?

The context postmodernity has created for theological truth claims has led to the development of two distinct approaches.[36] These are *postliberalism* (the Yale approach - represented in the work of Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, David Kelsey, Stanley Hauerwas, Ronald Thiemann and Charles Wood) and *revisionism* also called *correlationism*, (the Chicago approach - represented in the work of David Tracy, Gordon Kaufman, Edward Farley and Schubert

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[34] This is because of the necessary conflict between its own internal 'sacred' rationality and that perceived to lie outside in the 'secular' world.

[35] As we shall see further in Chapter 6, Tracy has performed a clever marriage of public rationality and art.

[36] Although I deal with deconstructive postmodern theology in Chapter Five, where the relationship between theological truth claims and language is discussed, I do not think its proponents are at all interested in the idea of a theological *truth* claim as I have defined it.

Ogden). The distinctions between the Yale and Chicago schools are sometimes stressed to the exclusion of those things they share in common, yet even here there is disagreement. Ronald Thiemann has himself claimed adherents of the Chicago school to be foundationalist, and adherents of the Yale school to be *anti*-foundationalist.[37] Gary Comstock has said that, "it is not at all clear that Chicagoans Paul Ricoeur and David Tracy <u>are</u> philosophical foundationalists"[38], and Thomas Guarino has included Tracy amongst his descriptions of "moderate postmoderns", "whose fundamental features include nonfoundationalist ontology".[39]

Although Lindbeck in particular has tried to distinguish his position from Tracy in recent years (as we shall see in Chapter Six), there is much to suggest in Tracy's later work a more powerful non-foundationalist stance. To make sense of what the two schools might share in *common* Nancey Murphy has pointed out some interesting parallels between Tracy and Lindbeck. Firstly, like Tracy, Lindbeck is concerned with providing a comprehensive *theory of religion generally*, and not merely with a theory of the Christian religion. Secondly, like Tracy, Lindbeck also treats religion as in the first instance a human phenomenon

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[37] See for example, Ronald Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology,* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), pp.44-46.

[38] Gary Comstock, "Two Types of Narrative Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LV/4 (1987), pp.687-717, p.688.

[39] Thomas Guarino, "Between Foundationalism and Nihilism: Is *Phronesis* the *Via Media* for Theology?" *Theological Studies,* 54 (1993), pp.37-54, p.46.

in the form of language and culture.[40] Richard Lint also offers some helpful clarification over the distinctions between postliberalism and revisionism when he discusses both as post*positivist* responses to the issue of foundationalism, and says furthermore that they,

> "ought not to be construed as theological visions themselves but rather as sets of procedures by which a theological vision may be judged adequate."[41]

For all the possible similarities, nonetheless the differences between postliberalism and revisionism are fundamental and concern the question of public rationality. While revisionism relies on the liberal confidence that some form of public reason will suffice in allowing understanding *between* cultures, and that truth is therefore a *correlated* thing, postliberalism is self-confessedly *post*liberal, acknowledging only an *internal* rationality that prizes truth as a *coherent* thing. Both postliberalism and revisionism therefore present the question of theological truth claims with different sets of opportunities. Both interpret the critique of foundationalism constructively as the exposure of the weaknesses of positivism, but interpret the importance of the demise of positivism differently. For the Yale school, the demise of positivism is most acutely expressed as the *failure* of an Enlightenment notion of public rationality that might act as a foundation for truth claims. It argues *against* models of theological evaluation that rely on such notions, and *for* their replacement with

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[40] Nancey Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernism,* p.118.

[41] Richard Lint, "The Postpositivist Choice: Tracy or Lindbeck" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LXI/4 (1990), pp.655-677, p.658 n.7.

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models that understand rationality in non-foundationalist, i.e., *narrative* terms. The Chicago school, on the other hand, understands the importance of the demise of positivism in terms of the *objectivity of knowledge* and consequently suggests a turn to a hermeneutic epistemological paradigm that functions within the overarching norms of a public rationality.

Which, then, is the better approach that promises an understanding of a theological truth claim between metaphysics and morals - one that neither reduces to a moral command or privileges itself over a moral command? Postliberalism has been keen to use some of the ideas found in Wittgenstein to suggest that religion is more like a language or a culture than like an epistemologically foundationalist body of knowledge.[42] It has suggested that religious beliefs function like grammar for life. For postliberals, religions consequently resemble cultures or languages in that they are frameworks, or idioms, within which reality can be construed and lived. For Lindbeck, the grammar of religion *shapes* the lives of individuals by providing conditions for both knowledge and experience, in the form of doctrinal rules.

It is because of this later point that Lindbeck has criticised Tracy's claim that doctrine is the *symbolic expression* of the bearer's *inner* convictions. This, he

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[42] See D Z. Phillips' Chapter "Grammar and the Nature of Doctrine" in *Faith After Foundationalism* (Colorado, Westview Press, 1988), pp.195ff, for a good account of Lindbeck's use of Wittgenstein.

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argues, militates against the contextual nature of belief, and consequently does not take adequate enough account of the actual *use* of doctrine. Speaking of all those thinkers he believes follow in a liberal current which he terms "experientialist-expressivist", he says,

> "whatever the variations, thinkers of this tradition all locate ultimately significant contact with whatever is finally important to religion in the pre-reflective experiential depths of the self and regard the public or outer features of religion as expressive and evocative objectifications (i.e., non-discursive symbols) of internal experience."[43]

According to Lindbeck, theologians like Tracy have understood inner pre-reflective experience as foundational, and language and culture merely expressive of that foundational pre-reflective experience.

> "the rationale suggested, though not necessitated, by an experiential-expressivist approach is that the various religions are diverse symbolisations of one and the same core experience of the Ultimate, and that they must therefore respect each other, learn from each other, and reciprocally enrich each other."[44]

However, Lindbeck argues that it is not possible to give any substance to the notion of experience that such approaches hold to.[45] For Lindbeck, since experience and the language used to express it have an intimate, causal relationship, it is not possible to strip away language or culture, and be left with

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[43] George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1984), p.21.

[44] Ibid., p.135.

[45] In "Lindbeck's New Program for Theology", *The Thomist* 49 (1985), pp.460-472, Tracy says he prefers "hermeneutical-political" to "experiential-expressivist" as a description of his own approach, though more recently he has used a term with more religious resonance - "mystical-prophetic"."I now see more clearly... that in practice and thereby in theory, (the) pervasive religious dialectic of manifestation and proclamation is best construed theologically as mystical-prophetic." David Tracy, *Dialogue With the Other: The Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Louvain, Peeters Press, 1990), p.7.

pure experience. Lindbeck fundamentally does not believe it is possible to give an intelligible account of Tracy's notion of experience and offers a challenge to him,

> "it is difficult or impossible to specify its distinctive features and yet unless this is done, the assertion of commonality becomes logically vacuous". [46]

There can be no doubt that Lindbeck puts his finger on one of the central problems with liberal attempts to shift the metaphysical locus of theology. As we shall see, even in Tracy's conception of the transformative role of faith, the priority of transformed human *subjectivity* comes to the fore. Nevertheless, apart from the obvious risks of confessionalism inherent in Lindbeck's own grammatical understanding of theological truth claims, the problem of finding something in grammar that will allow us to judge *between* rival truth claims, still remains. Under Lindbeck's rubric, when one grammar meets another, there is the real possibility of incommensurability. Religious people may in the end simply be living within different grammars of life, and therefore incapable of mapping their own experiences onto another's.

Where postliberalism is strong, is in terms of its appreciation of the role of *narrative*. Gary Comstock's article, "Two Types of Narrative Theology", argues that the defining distinction between Tracy and Lindbeck is in fact to do with approaches to narrative.[47] Postliberalism argues that narrative in religion is

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[46] George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, p.32.

[47] See Gary Comstock, "Two Types of Narrative Theology", p.687.

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irreducible (in Comstock's terminology "pure"), and that meaning is conveyed *by* narrative, and *in* narrative. The revisionist approach, on the other hand, holds that meaning is conveyed in narrative *through interpretation* (in Comstock's terminology "impure"). Both are concerned to make a theological response to the issues of postmodernity but believe in different ways of making that response. Bolstered by the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, postliberalism consequently argues that it is *only* in narrative that we find rational criteria for any kind of moral discourse; that there is no such thing as a non-narrative form of rationality that demands commitment from all humans.[48] Modernity's attempt to impose order upon the diversity of moral frameworks found in human culture has failed. To refuse to acknowledge the failure of public rationality and to insist upon a moral philosophy that is dependent upon the notion of a global public discourse, is to perpetuate disharmony and conflict. Such a global discourse does not exist, and consequently, what is required is a return to localised, and sectarian moral communities.[49]

There is much to say for the postliberals centralisation of narrative. Nevertheless, if a theological truth claim remains forever a narrative truth, as it seems to in postliberalism, then one person's story becomes as good as the next,

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[48] See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); also *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

[49] See for example, James Wm. McLendon Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology Volume I*, (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1986).

and we render ourselves incapable of the criticism and legitimation of *any* and *all* claims to truth. The narrative truth of religion must therefore, in the interests of conversation, be at some point *interpreted*; it must be made available in the broadest possible public sphere.

While postliberal claims prevent us from taking the power of narrative at all lightly, they nevertheless cannot provide us with the truly *global* public necessary for the adjudication of religious truth claims. By prioritising exclusivity, sectarianism and non-public discourse it can even be argued that they encourage an *abrogation* of personal responsibility in the sphere of action. Often accompanied by a deep-rooted suspicion of the modern political State, communitarian ethicists and the narrative theologians that utilise their beliefs, rely on a presupposed stability of culture. They assume that out of each local community there will emerge a consensus on behaviour which will work for the good of all communities. But where does evidence for this consensus come from? What if the communitarian premise that discourses are incommensurable leads also to the belief that *actions* are incommensurable? Even Nancey Murphy criticizes Lindbeck for this, saying that his understanding of ontological truth possesses no criteria for the assessment of theological truth claims.[50] And as Tracy himself says in response to Lindbeck's criticisms,

> "his own cultural-linguistic model needs to manifest far more than the present
> work does its ability to handle the question of truth-claims in theology to avoid

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[50] See Nancey Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity,* p.122.

Ultimately therefore, as Murphy points out, it can be argued that Lindbeck cannot evaluate the truth of different cultures because his understanding of truth owes too much to a communitarian model which invites religious relativism.[52] It therefore seems fair to suggest, that Lindbeck's vehement rejection of foundationalism might owe more to his insistence upon a highly prioritized position for *Christian* theological truth claims than to any conviction that the problem foundationalism poses for theological truth claims is quite as he has thought it to be. It is a damning charge, but is it the case that in the final analysis Lindbeck has a sectarian agenda? According to Gordon Michalson,

> "the postliberal position on the intelligibility of the Christian faith... controls the total action of the book".[53]

and Lindbeck himself says,

> "the motivations for this book are ultimately more substantively theological than theoretical".[54]

Consequently, does his criticism of what he tags the 'experiential-expressivist' theological model of Tracy and others, hinge on the fact that it does not do enough to preserve the particularity of *Christian* truth claims. While it would be unfair to answer these questions outright, they are nevertheless questions we are

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[51] David Tracy, "Lindbeck's New Program for Theology: A Reflection", p.461.

[52] See Nancey Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity,* p.118.

[53] Gordon Michalson, "A Response to Lindbeck" *Modern Theology* 4:2 (1988), pp.107-120.

[54] George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, p.10.

left with. What seems unquestionable, is that postliberalism does not do enough to preserve the idea of theological truth claims as open to public, critical evaluation. Lindbeck, it would appear, is in the end not really interested in such an understanding of theology. As Richard Lints says, in speaking of Lindbeck and his followers,

> "ultimately, questions of criticism become unimportant to this camp of theologians".[55]

We can possibly even draw a more pointed analogy, with earlier attempts like Barth's to make theological truth claims immune to cultural criticism, which, as Adina Davidovich says,

> "threaten, perhaps unwittingly, to free the dark forces of religious fanaticism and sectarian bigotry from the burden of justifying themselves before a court of reason and before the claims of morality and science".[56]

It therefore seems fair to argue, that an approach to theological truth such as postliberalism's will not find an audience. At least, not an audience that approximates to the fully public forum, needed for the evaluation of theological truth claims. Consequently, it is because of the absence of a fully public audience for theological truth claims that postliberalism cannot promise an understanding of a theological truth claim that is a successful mediator between metaphysics and morals. With theological truth somehow trapped in culture, how is it able to exercise any critique of morality, other than the morality it witnesses

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[55] Richard Lints, "The Postpositivist Choice: Tracy or Lindbeck", p.669.

[56] Adina Davidovich, *Religion as a Province of Meaning: The Kantian Foundations of Modern Theology* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1993), p.307ff.

in its own local spheres? Postliberal theological truth claims may indeed offer insight and coherence, for lives lived within the agreed fabric of the culture they come from. But confronted with another culture, outside that which they come from, does a postliberal theological truth claim have anything to say to anyone? Is there even the possibility of the *constructive* criticism of another culture's morality? Or do we end up with a return to a truly 'dark age' in which the *only* culture that there is, is the one *I* exist in? And if so, consequently, how *can* postliberals avoid privileging the metaphysics that spring from their own cultural-religious ethics, over the moral claims of all cultures apart from their own?

In contrast to postliberals, revisionists insist that such incommensurability that exists between different systems of belief (and they admit to some) is only real to the extent that a *public rationality* allows it to be. Lint brings this point out well,

> "The postliberal leans in the direction of the postpositivist critique of the verifiability criterion and Tracy and moderate postmoderns lean in the direction of the postpositivist critique of the objectivity of knowledge. The one is concerned more narrowly with the structures of human knowledge and the other is concerned with the relative objectivity of that knowledge. Tracy wants to affirm the underdetermination of all knowledge and thereby maintain some criteria of epistemic adequacy for the larger public of the academy."[57]

Following Schleiermacher, and in the tradition of liberal and *mediating* theology, David Tracy is a prime example of a revisionist theologian. Tracy believes that

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[57] Richard Lints, "The Postpositivist Choice: Tracy or Lindbeck?", pp.670-1.

theology is not merely a function of, and within, one *particular section* within society, but is at its very heart a function of society in its totality. All *authentic* theology must, in principle, be accessible to all in society. Theology must be *public* discourse. As we shall see, for Tracy, theology has three publics, the church, the academy and society itself. The role of the theologian in being responsible to these three publics is to,

> "explicate the basic plausibility structures of all three publics through the formulation of plausibility arguments and criteria of adequacy".[58]

It is this responsibility which ensures the publicness of theology because the task of the theologian is to lay bare the various forms of truth claims that arise from both the contemporary situation and the religious tradition, within which the theologian stands. Tracy's explicit desire is therefore to move the theological conversation forward into a framework whereby the validity of theological truth claims are secured by *centralising* criteria of publicness. How *successful* Tracy is, as we shall see, relies on his claim that the *aesthetic* is the most public of human realms. The question that Tracy believes has been successfully answered in revisionist approaches to theological truth, is how a religious culture might make truth claims accessible in the broader sphere of culture, and retain *both* a universalistic appeal and a particular meaningfulness.

To say that the theological conversation must inquire into the major symbols of *religious* belief and practice is not meant to exclude broader cultural symbols.

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[58] David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, p.31.

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It is meant merely to set some disciplinary boundaries that makes a move towards a publicly accessible theological truth claim plausible. As we shall see when we discuss David Tracy's work in detail, his way of establishing this move uses the notion of the *classic*, as a means by which specifically religious symbols have a *pivotal* though not necessarily *exclusive* place in the development of a systematic theology. The means by which Tracy's pluralistic and public theological truth claim is justified, relies on an idea which has a long pedigree, and which sees the truth claims of religion and *art* as standing or falling together. However, whether this idea is sufficient to ensure that a theological truth claim is neither reducible to a moral command, or privileged above a moral command will be the key question discussed in Chapters Five to Seven. Can such a model of theological truth, such as Tracy's, enable a move from *imagined* possibilities to *real* possibilities?

Conclusion

In this Chapter I have first, outlined the problem this thesis hopes to deal with. Secondly, I have described the philosophical context that the problem is located in. Thirdly, I have demarcated the field of scholarship wherein the most fruitful exploration of the problem can take place. I have argued that at the heart of the problem of theological truth claims lies the issue of religion between metaphysics and morals, and that the pertinence of the question is sharpened in the epistemological debates of postmodernity. Postliberalism's response to the problems raised by postmodernity fails because it fuels a sectarian division

between cultures and has a model of theological truth claims that does not promise to allow theological truth a successful mediating role between metaphysics and morals. Consequently, I have argued in contrast, that Tracy's approach, with the central category of *revisability,* lives up to the ideal of publicly accessible theological truth claim, and provides the better of the two approaches for our project.

CHAPTER TWO

ON THEOLOGICAL TRUTH
AND COMMUNICATIVE RATIONALITY

"To escape the impasses of modernity, theology must more than ever investigate itself and its epistemological foundations as *fides quaerens intellectum*, on the basis of a renewed concept of religious experience and rationality".

Anne Fortin-Melkevik[1]

Introduction

In Chapter One I have argued that a revisable understanding of theological truth is one that offers the best possibility of a bridge between metaphysics and morals, and that such a category is best preserved within an approach that relies on some form of *public* rationality. Since there is much debate over models of public reason, in this Chapter I will explore one option that theologians have been keen to pursue. I will begin by examining how the dominant form of reason in modernity has made the issue of *public* rationality so pointed, and will explore the failure of instrumentalist notions of reason with respect to the cognitive claims of religion and modernity's own chosen repository of ultimacy, the self. Next, I will examine the idea of a *communicative rationality* found in the work of Jürgen Habermas, before asking to what extent communicative

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[1] Anne Fortin-Melkevik, "The Reciprocal Exclusiveness of Modernity and Religion among Contemporary Thinkers Jürgen Habermas and Marcel Gauchet", in C. Geffré and J. Jossua *The Debate On Modernity* (London, SCM Press Ltd, 1992), pp.57-66, p.66.

rationality allows theological truth claims the space to be revisable. My conclusion is that the setting of theological truth claims within the context of a communicative rationality does allow for the possibility of religious pluralism, because by moving truth into the sphere of action we circumvent the problem of incommensurability. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether communicative rationality *by itself* can make truth revisable, without recourse to an ultimate goal. Models of communicative rationality have the possibility of the future unity of mankind as their goal, but is this goal enough to *realise* the possibility of the future unity of mankind? Thus, I argue communicative rationality needs the supplementation of an *eschatological* dimension to allow for the revisability of truth and the distinctiveness of a theological truth claim.

1. Instrumentalist Rationality, Religion and Human Identity

In Chapter One we have seen something of how postmodernity alters our perspective on the question of truth. Arising out of the as-yet ill-defined demise of modernity is an awareness that the failure of modernity has to do with the priority given to one highly individual form of rationality, and that a supplementation with a more *public* rationality is long overdue.[2] It is, I shall argue, the failure of modernity's reification of *instrumentalist* rationality with respect to both the cognitive claims of religion and an adequate model of human

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[2] For a good discussion of contemporary models of reason see Richard Bernstein, "The Rage Against Reason" in *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge, Mass; MIT, 1992), pp.31-56.

identity, that has made this supplementation an urgent requirement.

The contemporary theological conversation is deeply indebted to the critique of rationality that is provided by the Frankfurt school of critical theory.[3] Their achievement has been to further demonstrate the ways in which modernity has given precedence to a form of rationality which, although apparently successful in the techno-economic sphere, has been deeply destructive within other spheres of human life. The socio-political inadequacies of instrumental reason are therefore by now well-known. Instrumental reason is successful in establishing the *means* by which goals can be accomplished, it allows for the maximum possible procedural economy, but is incapable of establishing the *goals themselves*. As Alasdair MacIntyre has said,

> "it (instrumental reason) can assess truths of fact and mathematical relations
> but nothing more. In the realm of practice it can speak only of means."[4]

The question we will be faced with by the end of this Chapter is whether the alternative to instrumental rationality - communicative rationality - is any better at establishing goals!

The crisis of instrumental rationality (the language of 'crisis' is very much the language of the Frankfurt School), clearly goes beyond the inadequacies of any

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[3] See Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York, Seabury Press, 1972); Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London, Routledge Kegan & Paul, 1984) and *Negative Dialectics* (New York, Seabury Press, 1966).

[4] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London, Duckworth, 1981), p.52.

one philosopher or tradition of philosophy. The key problem it creates is the positing of an unbridgeable gulf between the good and the true. An everyday example will demonstrate this point. How many times do we see and hear the suggestion that the model of human personhood that all persons ought to aspire to holds rational competence to be its primary quality? We need not look far in society to see the redundancy of such a model, yet who is regarded seriously that mounts a platform and calls for a model of human personhood that equates intelligence with goodness? Witness the confusion in just about every aspect of contemporary society over an adequate model for understanding the relationship between the objective world of facts and the subjective world of values. As if it is not plain from the outset that the confusion comes not from the failure to find an adequate model, but from the impossibility of the premised distinction. The fact/value dichotomy is then one of the clear weaknesses in instrumental rationality. Modernity's chosen account of reason threatened the realm of the ethical with obsolescence, and introduced the real prospect of ethical relativism. Hilary Putnam puts his finger on the problem when he says,

> "an adequate philosophical account of reason must not explain away the ethical facts, but enable us to know how they can be facts, and how we can know them."[5]

a. Instrumental Rationality and Religion

The crisis precipitated by modernity's version of reason is demonstrated

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[5] Hilary Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face* (Cambridge, Mass; Harvard University Press, 1990), p.162.

powerfully in relation to the cognitive claims of religion. From the ordinary family occasions that we invest with a surplus of meaning to the symbols and rites of a complex and powerful political democracy, something which can be described as ritual, and which affords the opportunity of faith, informs and guides human action. Yet instrumentalist notions of reason have persisted in misinterpreting both ritual and faith as superstition. The function of religion in providing a framework within which sense could be made of random occurrences has been usurped by means-dominated models of science as the most effective way of predicting and altering the course of events. But the claim that humanity has somehow progressed beyond primitive superstition, and that religious faith and ritual is devoid of meaning, is a denial of the power of human creativity. Such a claim is, I believe, an unnecessary concession to the totalising influence in instrumental reason, that should in the first place be the *target* of any responsible criticism.

When we attempt to understand religious belief and behaviour using the variety of human/social science approaches that have become familiar within the general field of the humanities, we are inevitably forced to accept that religious belief and practice carries a remainder for the participant. That is, that any explanation that we offer is only provisionally adequate, and does not exhaust the meaning of the belief or practice for the believer. We are therefore forced into choosing between two conclusions. Either the believer is deluded about the excess of meaning his/her religion provides. Or, that it is the science that we bring to

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religion that is at fault. In the positivistic climate of modernity the latter option

has been unthinkable and so, even in the field of religious studies, the former

option triumphed, creating the familiar secular scepticism of theological truth.

But both of these options are unacceptable and stem from a fundamental *flaw* in

understanding religious truth claims as exclusively propositional. As Bertel

Wahlstrom says,

> "To say that a belief system consists of 'an enduring organisation of cognitions
> about one or more aspects of the universe' and to apply this view to the belief
> system of religion can be misleading in fundamental ways. For one thing, this
> view suggests that understanding beliefs is like understanding propositions. It
> ignores the fact that we can understand what it is to hold a belief only if we
> understand what people do. This is so because different beliefs are held in
> different ways. We cannot tell what kind of beliefs religious beliefs are without
> knowing the place they occupy in the lives of people."[6]

How then has instrumentalist rationality failed the cognitive claims of religion?

How *does* instrumental reason marginalise theological truth claims? Anne Fortin-

Melkevik is unambiguous in her answer to this question.

> "The thinkers of modernity, from Kant to Max Weber, radicalize the
> fundamental problem of the reciprocal exclusion of faith and reason and restrict
> the practice of theology to the sphere of that which is not knowledge and has
> no rationality".[7]

While some might take issue with Fortin-Melkevik's analysis of the legacy Kant

has left religion with (in Chapter Four we will see Adina Davidovich present a

different picture of Kant's view on religion to the one we are accustomed to),

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[6] Bertel Wahlstrom, *Religious Action, a Philosophical Analysis* (Abö, Abö Akademis Förlag, 1987), p.23.

[7] Anne Fortin-Melkevik, "The Reciprocal Exclusiveness of Modernity and Religion among Contemporary Thinkers Jürgen Habermas and Marcel Gauchet", p.57.

we can nevertheless agree that instrumental rationality has led to the marginalisation, if not ghettoisation, of theological truth claims. It is also the case that the main cause of this has been, as Fortin-Melkevik says, the perceived "reciprocal exclusion of faith and reason". The history of the debate over the relationship between faith and reason is indeed a long one, and is perhaps the distinctive and paradigmatic *theological* debate. What I am suggesting here is that the debate needs to take account of the way that instrumental rationality has been allied with an understanding of a *conceptual scheme* that has not served the interests of religion well, and which has robbed theological truth claims of any ordinary cognitive content.[8]

In modernity, the conceptual scheme has been seen as a system of categories responsible for the organisation of raw experience. The picture that this understanding has relied upon is of a giant railway network. The railway-network provides a basic infrastructure that ensures continuity and uniformity. It facilitates easy communication and the speedy transfer of information with the minimum of distortion. Through its connections with the rest of known culture it gives identity to places that lack any. However, the railway network is in fact its *own* system of reference. In modernity, the conceptual scheme has a similar nature. It has also become its own system of reference, to the extent that in

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[8] See for example Terry F.Godlove *Religion, Interpretation and Diversity of Belief: The Framework Model From Kant To Durkheim To Davidson,* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989), in which it is argued that religions are alternative conceptual frameworks.

modernity reality derives its identity from the shape of the conceptual schemes that have been imposed upon it.

The problem with this is that it fosters a scheme/world dualism which marginalises much that constitutes ordinary human experience. Anything which turns out not to be scheme-like, cannot 'hook onto' reality. The realms represented in the worlds of art and religion are the most obvious losers in this respect but ordinary human experiences equally suffer under this understanding. Although critics will argue that implicit in the notions of art and religion lie some kind of unavoidable correspondence between them and a conceptual scheme that manages all that they are taken to represent, still it is fair to say that the notion of a conceptual-scheme must come up against the basic human experiences of love, desire and suffering.[9] Conceptual schemes are therefore only partially adequate, and involve an inevitable conflict between the scheme itself, and the reality it represents.

The origins of the problem of scheme/world dualism can of course be traced throughout the history of philosophy. However, nowhere has it become more acute than in the work of Immanuel Kant. Although Kant is widely held to have endorsed a fundamental scheme/world dualism, his own philosophy makes subtle distinctions which attempt to limit its negative consequences. Kant's greatest

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[9] As we shall see later, Tracy's notion of an analogical *imagination* is an attempt to overcome the sterility of the modernist notion of a conceptual scheme.

achievement was to add nuances to a crude distinction between the passive

incoming data which constitutes experience, over against the active organising

framework that are the *categories of understanding.*

> "But though all our knowledge begins with experience, it does not follow that
> it all arises from experience. For it is quite possible that even our empirical
> knowledge is a compound of that which we perceive through impressions, and
> of that which our own faculty of knowledge (incited by sense impressions)
> supplies from itself."[10]

For Kant, we are able to know the world because and precisely to the extent that

we organise it through the categories of understanding. Therefore, although Kant

argued that we see the world through a conceptual scheme, for him, this did not

mean that the empirical world was forever distorted or hidden from us. It was

the *necessary condition* of empirical knowledge that our conceptual scheme was

transcendent to us. What Kant holds to is a view of human knowledge that

differs radically from the one pre-supposed in earlier empiricist formulations and

corresponds more with something Adina Davidovich hazards to call religious.

A similar view of cognition can be found in Simone Weil. Weil's model begins

with a conception of the human self as action.[11]

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[10] Immanuel Kant *Critique of Pure Reason*, in Lewis White Beck (ed.) *Kant Selections*, (New York, Macmillan, 1988), p.104.

[11] Peter Winch suggests in *The Just Balance*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989) that Weil's approach also bears similarities to ideas in Wittgenstein, a point which is also brought out in D Z. Phillips essay on Simone Weil, in Richard Bell's book *Simone Weil's Philosophy of Culture: Readings Towards a Divine Humanity* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.78. "Simone Weil wants to bring us back from metaphysical words to real words. Instead of drawing a sharp distinction between speculative and practical knowledge she urges us to give practice, human action, a central place in our speculations."

> "Existing, thinking, knowing are merely aspects of a single reality: ability to act",[12]

also,

> "What I am is defined by what I can do".[13]

Central to the formation of concepts for Weil is the idea that perception is *active*.[14] Perception itself involves a human reaction which she describes as "a sort of dance",

> "The very nature of the relationship between ourselves and what is external to us, a relationship which consists in a reaction, a reflex, is our perception of the external world. Perception of nature, pure and simple, is a sort of dance; it is this dance that makes perception possible for us."[15]

Weil indicates in this statement that even primitive, pre-reflective experiences are not passive, but active, and that by recognising the centrality of action in concept-formation we can give an account which does not create an un-bridgeable gulf between experience and the world. When we move away from Weil's more directly philosophical claims and consider her interest in religion,

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[12] Simone Weil, *Lectures in Philosophy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1978), tr. Hugh Price, p.10.

[13] Peter Winch, *The Just Balance* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989) p.10, quoting from Simone Weil's *Lectures in Philosophy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1978), tr. Hugh Price.

[14] Weil's earliest intimations of an anti-Cartesian turn is found in her student dissertation "Science et perception dans Descartes". In this work she modified the Cartesian argument to read "I (can) act therefore I am". Although, as Winch suggests, unlike Descartes Weil does not emphasise the existential and ontological import of the statement, it is nevertheless clear that from the outset thought, for Weil, is characterised by activity. Her student dissertation goes on to argue that the activity of thought cannot be understood to be a power over anything because it cannot be demonstrated that thought itself achieves the things it supposes itself to be causally related to. See Winch, *The Just Balance*, p.9.

[15] Simone Weil, *Lectures on Philosophy*, p.52.

we can identify certain potential insights which have a clear bearing on the problem of theological truth claims. For example, religion, as in the case of perception, can also be understood alongside the centrality of action in concept-formation. Indeed to fail to do this, which is the root flaw in philosophy of religion, means that the context in which concepts have their sense, is ignored. By thinking of any experience as passive, including that which we would wish to call religious experience, we create an unbridgeable gap between the experience and its object. But the gap must be filled with the idea of experience as active. And this is why, according to Weil, we can talk meaningfully of a "case of contradictories which are true",

> "God exists: God does not exist. Where is the problem? I am quite sure there is a God in the sense that I am quite sure my love is not illusory. I am quite sure that there is not a God in the sense that I am quite sure nothing real can be anything like what I am able to conceive when I pronounce this word. But that which I cannot conceive is not an illusion."[16]

What might distinguish a post-instrumentalist theological truth claim, is the idea that experience is not passive, and therefore can contain within itself the seeds of *disclosive possibility*. As we shall come on to see, the place possibility occupies in a theological truth claim is of central importance for the argument of this thesis. In Ricoeur and Tracy, theological truth claims disclose the possibility of authenticity. While I will concur that theology is indeed about the

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[16] Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (London, Routledge Kegan & Paul, 1952), tr. Emma Craufurd, p.103. For Weil, it is a mistake to think that the theological confusion that exists over what the word 'God' *refers to*, negates its use. What makes God real, in her account is the human desire for the good expressed in love. See for example, Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks* (London, Oxford University Press, 1970), tr. Richard Rees, p.157. "If God should be an illusion from the point of view of existence, He is the sole reality from the point of view of the good... God exists because I desire Him, that is as certain as my existence".

disclosure of possibility, I will not agree that what is disclosed in Ricoeur's and Tracy's model, is adequate.

Part of the problem with theological truth claims in modernity is clear. Modernity's model of reason has been intimately linked to a model of a conceptual scheme that has fared badly for theological truth claims because there could be no validation of religious experience outside the scheme/world dualism which modernity fostered. But conceptual schemes cannot be abandoned altogether. We must therefore ask if a theological truth claim inevitably involves a conceptual framework, then do such frameworks not involve *exclusive* truth claims, or can a conceptual framework be both permanent and provisional at the same time? Donald Davidson thinks the latter. In response to the claim that different conceptual schemes, implies incommensurability between schemes, Davidson has produced an argument which associates having a conceptual scheme with having a language.[17] Davidson argues that this understanding avoids implying an incommensurable relationship between differing schemes.

Davidson is accurately described as a "non-reductive materialist", and as such he breaks with a long tradition associating materialism with reductionism.[18] He is a materialist in the sense that he affirms that a person's physical state

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[17] See for example Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" in *On Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1984), pp.183-198.

[18] Simon Evnine, *Donald Davidson* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1991), p.5.

constrains their mental state, but by continuing to argue for the "anomalism of the mental", for the idea that mind is not governed by laws, he follows Quine in making a break with the connection between forms of materialism and the idea that every meaningful statement is translatable into a statement about immediate experience. The problem of interpretation in Davidson's account of it, arises out of his discussion of the truth conditions for language, in Tarski's formal theory of meaning. The question of how such truth conditions can apply in a more universal context is what he describes as the problem of "radical interpretation", and this problem is in essence the problem of the incommensurability of conceptual schemes.

According to Davidson a conceptual scheme is held to be a "way of organising experience", a "system of categories that give form to the data of sensation", a "point of view from which individuals, cultures or periods, survey the passing scene".[19] Although the notion of a conceptual scheme is useful in explaining differences in belief and behaviour, the paradox of it is that such differences can only be understood if there is a common co-ordinate system on which to plot them. Consequently, the existence of such a system rules out from the outset the possibility of *radical* incommensurability.

To make his argument work, the first move Davidson makes is to identify

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[19] See Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme", p.183.

conceptual schemes with *language*. The definition of a conceptual scheme is for Davidson that it conforms to certain norms identifiable as language. This done, the second move Davidson makes is to argue that the definition of language is that it is something that can be translated. Consequently, since a conceptual scheme is a language, there can be no *ultimate* incommensurability between different conceptual schemes. His argument appears to hinge on a simple syllogism. All languages are translatable. A conceptual scheme is a language, therefore a conceptual scheme is translatable. To unsettle Davidson's argument we would need to undermine either of the two premises.

Assuming that the premises of Davidson's argument can be defended, it can be useful in a number of areas of debate. With it the problems of religious pluralism and the secular/sacred and Church/world dichotomies can be alleviated. The tension between the universal and the particular in religious ways of seeing the world may be resolved. As one enthusiast of a Davidsonian schema has written,

> "Suitably redirected, it shows that Taoists and Druids, as well as primitives and Presbyterians, must agree on most matters, though not, perhaps, on most religious matters."[20]

Most importantly for this thesis, as Tracy himself points out, the use of Davidson's understanding of a conceptual scheme can allow the idea of *possibility* to have more cognitive leverage and therefore help define a

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[20] Terry Godlove, "In What Sense are Religions Conceptual Frameworks", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52 (1984), pp.289-305, p.290.

theological truth claim more precisely,

> "That a Davidsonian position can also be developed into a fuller hermeneutical position where possibility and analogy would play the major conceptual roles continues to seem to me to be a promising alternative."[21]

The argument that I have so far been pursuing in this Chapter therefore suggests that the problem with theological truth claims in modernity relates to the pre-eminence modernity has given to a certain model of a conceptual scheme. In this model, cognition is understood entirely passively. Religious experience consequently has to be interpreted as either *pre*-cognitive or *non*-cognitive. However, neither of these understandings provides any opportunity for something that purports to be a theological *truth* claim. Nevertheless, using Davidson's understanding of a conceptual scheme, there may be a way of holding on to the cognitive dimension of a theological truth claim without incurring conceptual relativism.

b. Instrumental Rationality and the 'Self'

There is some irony in the confidence that modernity invested in the self as its own chosen repository of ultimacy. For it is precisely with the self that instrumental rationality has been seen to be most vulnerable, and has precipitated the crisis which has demanded a more public form of reason. Nowhere more was modernity's notion of reason expected to achieve lasting results than in relation to the self. However, the Enlightenment confidence in the fact that, firstly the

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[21] David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion and Hope* (London, SCM Press Ltd, 1987), p.138 n.30.

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deepest workings of the human condition could be described with all the precision of a timepiece, then secondly that such a description could create a more just society, rested upon the success of instrumental reason in avoiding describing a self which could only view the other as *external* to it. Modernity's model of reason has not made good on this promise, with the other not simply being viewed as external to the self, but as the enemy whose subjugation is necessary for survival.[22]

At the heart of modernity's notion of the self is the picture of an *essentialist* self that can order reality with the divine competence of a Medieval God. Frank Farrell makes the suggestion that the idea that God "knows all things by knowing his own essence" and "sees everything in one, namely, in himself alone"[23], passes directly into modern notions of subjectivity as the idea that the relationship with what is other is in fact a self-relation, that what is encountered in the other, is in fact one's own interiority.[24] The consequent struggle for

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[22] Religious fundamentalism is probably the fullest expression of the crisis of modernity's notion of the self.

[23] Frank Farrell, *Subjectivity, Realism and Postmodernity; The Recovery of the World* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.7, quoting from Aquinas' *Summa Contra Gentes* (Rome, 1984), tr. A C. Pegis *et al* and *Summa Theologiae* (London, 1989), tr. Timothy McDermott.

[24] Many others have sought to identify this problem in terms of the thesis that the modern self still bears the damaging imprint of a religious worldview. Frank Farrell's approach follows in this tradition by attempting to identify the theological model that he believes still remains imbued in modern notions of the self. In *Subjectivity, Realism and Postmodernism* he documents what he regards as being certain outmoded models of subjectivity. Farrell is clear that although one aspect of this disenchantment is the disillusionment experienced by the modern self, his interest lies more in the "loss of the world's or subjectivity's enchanted status," p.3. Farrell argues that the maintenance of theological models of the self have contributed to the problems

mastery and domination that ensues is therefore easy to identify. As Farrell says,

> "Subjectivity can then be thought of as possessing an awareness of content independently of how things happen in the world, and as secure in a rich self-presence, because of its relation, implicit or explicit, to a divine reality."[25]

For Fergus Kerr, this model of the self coincides with the notion of *objectivity*, as the only sure criteria for knowledge. With objectivity as the only criterion of knowledge, the role of the *human* knower becomes devalued, and the assertion consequently becomes possible that,

> "the only perfect depiction of reality would have to be from nobody's point of view".[26]

Kerr furthermore suggests that paradoxically, the outcome of this claim is to assert once again a positive and naive metaphysics that makes *God's* point of view the only fully valid point of view. Although Kerr does not intend to reject outright the Cartesian turn in theology (the notion of a self-conscious, autonomous individual is a powerful metaphysical preconception and is not simply *wrong*, as if it can be replaced), it is, nevertheless, a philosophy of the self which contains an *inverted* theology. It suggests (wrongly) that there is a metaphysically real and distinct, centre whose existence confirms and guarantees

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of modernity by the progressive "thinning" of the world, with a nominalism (meaning the denial of the real existence of abstract entities), that has placed the least possible constraint on human willing and ordering.

[25] Frank Farrell, *Subjectivity, Realism and Postmodernity: The Recovery of the World,* p.9.

[26] Fergus Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986), p.24.

our humanity. This, for Kerr, is untenable not because the self can be replaced by something more legitimate, *but because such a suggestion ends in a denial of our material existence.* [27]

The failure of instrumental rationality with respect to the self is therefore two-fold; on the one hand the subject and ego-centred self of modernity is incapable of viewing otherness as anything other than a threat; on the other hand it is a self which leads to the creation of a radical dichotomy between the spiritual and the material, mind and matter, God and man. Criticisms of this kind from theological stables are of course not hard to come by but constructive proposals that successfully engage the problem are. One such constructive proposal is to assert that what being a self *means* is intimately linked to the question of what it means to be *good*. In *Sources of the Self* Charles Taylor offers a sustained analysis of the modern view of the self, with exactly this aim.[28] Taylor wishes to avoid the picture of the self forced upon us by instrumental reason, and offers a carefully articulated moral ontology which attempts to make discussion of the *sources* of the self, "the goods, reflection on which, morally empower us", viable

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[27] In Anthony C. Thistelton's *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self* (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1995), we are shown how the self of postmodernity, although possessing greater realism than the illusory optimism of the self of modernity, nevertheless can only find fulfilment in the context of a theology of hope. Thiselton's claim is that while postmodernity is successful in exposing truth claims as disguised attempts to legitimate power bids, the task of distinguishing between manipulative and non-manipulative (ie Christian/religious) truth claims still remains, and falls to the practice of theology. See Chapter 3, "Do All Controlling Models in Religion Serve Manipulative Purposes?", pp19-26.

[28] See for example Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989).

in an increasingly difficult moral context.[29]

Taylor suggests that where modernity's view of the self has gone astray has been by separating identity and the good. What it means to be a self is *inseparable* from what it means to be good. Taylor believes that our moral choices are determined by more than simple behaviourist principles; that our moral choices cannot be reduced, as they are in modernity's account, to the level of one subjective choice against another, because there exists certain intuitions, what he calls "strong evaluations", which demonstrate our commitment to something which *transcends* our personal preferences and to which we accord more than passing value.

> "[These] involve discriminations of right or wrong, better or worse, higher or lower, which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations, or choices, but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which they can be judged."[30]

For Taylor, these intuitions can be divided into three related fields of conviction relating to the human condition; intuitions relating to the sanctity of human life; intuitions relating to the ideal of the good life or happiness; and finally, intuitions relating to the nature of human dignity. They provide us with the bedrock hope of consensus in the public realm and personal satisfaction in the individual sphere. However, Taylor also claims that the peculiar context of modernity has made our moral intuitions vulnerable in a previously un-

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[29] Ibid., p.264.

[30] Ibid., p.4.

precedented way, that our contemporary situation is one which has lost the frameworks or horizons that once made our intuitions more self-evident. His intention is therefore to defend the need for an *articulation* of our deepest moral intuitions and thus hopefully preserve a horizon within which we can form criteria of judgement.

What Taylor shows us, therefore, is that the crowning achievement of modernity has been to cap its understanding of the self, as something which denies otherness and enforces unwanted dichotomies, with a model of selfhood which renders us *helpless in deciding upon how we should behave in the world*. With such a catalogue of errors the limitations of instrumental rationality are fully exposed. The model of selfhood that has emerged out of modernity is one that betrays at least three less desirable characteristics; it views the other as external and threatening to its own integrity; it separates inherently related spheres of human experience; and it is devoid of a dimension which might achieve the unity of identity and morality. Modernity's hope of establishing a more *just* social order on the basis of such an understanding of the self, is therefore fatally compromised; and at the root of this is the *failure* of modernity's own model of reason. Modernity's favourite son must therefore take his place along with his siblings. Instrumental rationality must be regarded as only *one* possible model and the recovery of more *inclusive* notions of reason must be made. A *communicative* model of rationality is an alternative. This accepts *both* the critical theorists suspicion of the adequacy of modernity's model of reason in

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articulating a more adequate understanding of the self, *and yet* attempts to cling

onto the principle of universalizability. We shall examine this alternative next.

2. On the Promise of Communicative Rationality

Modernity's failure is obviously a grave one with far-reaching consequences.

Aware of this failure and of the immensity of the problem it poses, Jürgen

Habermas asks,

> "If world views have foundered on the separation of cognitive from socially
> integrative components, if world-maintaining interpretive systems today belong
> irretrievably to the past, then what fulfils the moral-practical task of
> constituting ego and group identity"?[31]

Emerging out of the Frankfurt school of critical theory, this question has

dominated Habermas's work and has led to the development of a possible route

out of the impasse that modernity has created.[32] While rejecting any overly

simplistic resolution to the problems created by epistemological foundationalism,

Habermas has nevertheless sought to defend and reformulate an older, classical

view of reason. This view of reason attempts to uphold the inseparability of truth

and morality, of facts and values, of theory and practice. He defends the view

that,

> "the truth of statements is in the last analysis linked to the intention of the

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[31] Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1975), tr. Thomas McCarthy, p.120.

[32] The story of Habermas's relationship with the Frankfurt School is well documented. See Stephen K. White *Cambridge Companion to Habermas* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1995), Chapter One. Habermas claims to be continuing in the critical spirit of the early Frankfurt school which is more optimistic about political and social reconstruction than the work of its later representatives, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno.

good and true life".[33]

Habermas's efforts coincide with a stream of philosophy described as *praxis* philosophy, which includes,

> "radically democratic kinds of American Pragmatism (GH Mead, Dewey) and of analytic philosophy (Charles Taylor)",[34]

Habermas writes,

> "Praxis philosophy is guided by the intuition that it still makes sense to try to realise the idea of an ethical totality even under the functional constraints set by highly complex social systems."[35]

The emphasis upon *praxis* in thinkers like Habermas, has been occasioned by a powerful recognition of the nature of theory and its relationship to practice. Richard Bernstein's *Praxis and Action* discusses the four major schools of modern philosophy Marxism, existentialism, pragmatism and analytic philosophy in the light of the notion of *praxis* and points clearly to a retrieval of an Aristotelian usage of the term.[36] Bernstein shows how Aristotle's distinction between *theoria* and *praxis* is the direct ancestor of the more modern distinction between theory and practice and that Aristotle furthermore prefigured contemporary interest in the subject by viewing reason in non-instrumentalist terms. For Aristotle, *praxis* in contrast to *theoria*, does not have as its goal the

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[33] Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests: A General Perspective* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1971), tr. Jeremy J. Shapiro, p.303.

[34] Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1987), tr. F. Lawrence, p.394 n.15.

[35] Ibid., p.62.

[36] See Richard J. Bernstein, *Praxis and Action* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1971).

acquisition of knowledge for its own sake, but has as its goal a good life.[37]

Bernstein goes on to suggest that it was only in the post-Hegelian environment of Germany in the 1840's that the appeal of the notion of *praxis* reached its peak, issuing in the development of a comprehensive and systematic theory of *praxis* in the work of Karl Marx.[38] According to Bernstein, the concept of *praxis* that was originally fundamental to Marx's work had somehow been overlooked in pre-war developments of Marxist thought, and it was only with Sartre's *Critique de la raison dialectique*, allied with the development of post-Wittgensteinian notions of action, that *praxis* has come to receive some attention again.[39] [40]

At root the emphasis on *praxis* is meant to deny the assumption that practice is merely the un-reflective and mechanistic application of theory. To emphasise *praxis* is consequently to emphasise the dynamic that practice itself brings to theory. Philosophers who concentrate on *praxis* are therefore at the very least concerned to prevent the subversion of practice by theory, and in the more

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[37] For Aristotle, the notion of the good life was inseparable from the notion of the individual's role in the *polis*. See Bernstein, *Praxis and Action*, p.ix.

[38] Bernstein, *Praxis and Action,* p.xi.

[39] See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (London, Penguin, 1976), (tr.) A M. Sheridan-Smith.

[40] See also Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks* (London, Oxford University Press, 1970), tr. Richard Rees, p.362, whose categoric commitment to the priority of praxis is brought out in her comments in a notebook entry from the period near the end of her life, "Philosophy (including problems of cognition etc.) is exclusively an affair of action and practice".

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adamantly Marxist forms, are concerned to facilitate the subversion of theory by practice.

As a *praxis* philosopher, Habermas is a complex thinker whose work, already in his lifetime, has generated a mini-industry of commentary. The following comments do not pretend therefore to be exhaustive, but are intended to highlight those areas of Habermas's thought that relate particularly to the question of public theology. In essence, the promise that Habermas holds out to us, is of a universalistic rationality that does not risk the errors we saw in Chapter One with postliberal communitarian models of reason. His is, furthermore, a form of rationality, that is at the very least aware of the marginalisation and distortion of truth that modernity's chosen model of reason has led to.

As part of his critique of modernity Habermas seeks to explore a form of *transformative praxis*.[41] He resists the contextualism and relativism of people like Alasdair MacIntyre and George Lindbeck, and defends the Enlightenment ideal of universalism without abandoning its model of rationality. This is not

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[41] We shall contrast Habermas' work with that of Hans George Gadamer in the next chapter. Both share an acute awareness of the impact of instrumental rationality in modernity, and both have a commitment to overcome the sublation of practice by theory. Where they differ is in terms of the models of truth employed in the strategies they propose to overcome such sublation. For Gadamer, truth is primarily hermeneutical, and rests on the viability of rhetoric. Whereas for Habermas, Gadamer's confidence in the power of rhetoric, ignores the fact that rhetoric can incapacitate a full social critique, and thus lend support to the systematically distorted communicative situation we find ourselves in modernity. Habermas consequently maintains that only a model of truth as transformative praxis, which includes a theory of communicative competence, can succeed in such a situation.

however simply a response to fickle changes in philosophical climate, it is based on the conviction that traditional accounts of reason and the Western economic and political models that spring from them, are incapable of enacting real change.

While encouraged by poststructuralist critiques of reason, especially the connection they make between instrumental reason and domination, Habermas therefore rejects the drift in critical theory that minimises confidence in political action *per se*.[42] The task he sets himself is to reconceive of subjectivity in such a way that does not, in contrast to the political apathy of the post-structuralists - regard emancipation itself as illusory. Like the post-structuralists, Habermas also believes that all ethical reflection is governed by discourse. Unlike the post-structuralists however, he insists that precise criteria must be used to determine that which can be properly thought of as discourse. Hence, for Habermas discourse is very carefully defined as *action oriented towards understanding*.

To achieve the transformative *praxis* latent in action oriented towards understanding, Habermas suggests a radical paradigm change in philosophy and social theory, arguing that the paradigm of a 'subject-centred' philosophy of consciousness is defunct, and that consequently,

"the critique of subject-centred reason is thus a prologue to a critique of a

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[42] Habermas believes Foucault's criticisms of the totalisation of reason are valid but do not necessitate the kind of response Foucault himself encourages.

bankrupt culture."[43]

Habermas suggests that such a change must be to a paradigm that stresses the structures of inter-subjectivity which are implicit in understanding, and this paradigm he calls "communicative action".

For Habermas the paradigm of communicative action is meant to escape the constraints of instrumental forms of rationality. It does this with a communicative rationality.[44] In Habermas's schema, the growth of science, technology and bureaucratization has caused reason to adopt a purely instrumental character and become no longer the liberator of humanity, but rather its oppressor. Communicative action and communicative rationality are therefore potential vehicles for a successful answer to the problem of the relationship between theory and practice.

> "The theory of communicative competence is a sweeping attempt to reconceptualize the philosophical foundations of the theory-practice problematic".[45]

For Habermas the single entity of Enlightenment reason, with all its foundationalist certainty must be differentiated into what he calls "distinct rationality complexes". In modernity a metaphysical conception of reason was

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[43] Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass; MIT Press, 1987), tr. Frederick Lawrence, p.viii.

[44] See Don Browning and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, ed. *Habermas, Modernity & Public Theology* (New York, Crossroads, 1992), for good exegesis of Habermas basic position as well as a number of possible theological directions as a result of it.

[45] Jürgen Habermas, *The Legitimation Crisis*, p.xviii.

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related to a philosophy of origins which attempted to connect the whole of reality with one originating moment. However, an adequate *post*metaphysical conception of reason, according to Habermas, has not one moment, but three. Furthermore, these three moments correspond to the activities within the cognitive spheres of science, morality and art. The postmetaphysical conception of reason is consequently a truly eclectic, post-idealist, one based on a weak as opposed to a strong concept of theory. In modernity metaphysical reason has (wrongly) been allied with a strong conception of theory, where,

> "true knowledge relates to what is purely universal, immutable and necessary".[46]

But the final death blow to this metaphysical understanding of reason has come from instrumental rationality, from a,

> "new type of procedural rationality that has asserted itself since the 17th century",[47]

This new "procedural rationality" also confronts us with new requirements for justification. And it is these requirements which, like Rorty, Habermas believes have irreversibly, "shattered the cognitive privilege of philosophy" for ever.[48]

For Habermas, metaphysical reason assumed a privileged and pre-critical vantage point over all reality. Such a vantage point automatically meant that

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[46] Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical thinking; Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge, Mass; MIT Press, 1992), p.13.

[47] Ibid., p.13.

[48] Ibid., p.13.

metaphysical reason was incapable of revision or of engaging constructively with counter-argument. It was consequently opposed *in principle* to the kind of society that tried to solve its problems through conversation, dialogue and mutual acceptance. Inevitably therefore, metaphysical reason endorsed the "direct and strategic use of force", as an acceptable solution to social disharmony. Postmetaphysical reason consequently attempted to expose any position that tried to close conversation, or tried to evade open argumentation in an unassailable foundationalism.

With such a powerful critique of the failure of instrumental rationality to make truth revisable, it is easy to see why theologians have been interested in Jürgen Habermas. Habermas has been seized upon by some theologians as the answer to the problem of theological truth claims, even though he himself rejects overtly theological attempts at communicative ethics.[49] Peter Hodgson for example has suggested that Habermas's notion of reason as communicative action can be appropriated into a doctrine of salvation,

> "Perhaps 'communicative rationality' can be taken as a cipher for reason under the condition of redemption. Communicative rationality at its highest involves a discursive or dialogical rationality in which literally everything is open to question, in which consent is sought only through agreement rather than by the imposition of authority... What we are describing is a religious condition, and a utopian one at that, for which the word 'salvation' or 'redemption' is

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[49] Helmut Peukert's work is a more systematic theological appropriation of both early and late Frankfurt schools, but is explicitly devoted to a theological outworking of Habermas's ideas in particular. See Helmut Peukart's *Science, Action and Fundamental Theology*, (Cambridge Mass; MIT Press, 1986).

appropriate."[50]

Hodgson even goes so far as identifying *God* with the liberation that springs from perfected communicative rationality,

> "Thus we can say that God simply **is** the perfection of communicative freedom, the One who loves in freedom."[51]

Tracy has sometimes been thought of as attempting a similar thing to Hodgson (see for example Thomas Guarino's article where he describes Tracy's *Plurality and Ambiguity* as an attempt to use Habermas to move beyond the weaknesses of Gadamer by supplementing the *phronesis* tradition with a theory of communicative action).[52] Nevertheless, Tracy makes a significant number of criticisms of Habermas.[53]

Like Habermas, Tracy is aware that the marriage of a dominant instrumental form of reason with an unbridled techno-economic culture lies behind the crises of meaning in modernity. While instrumental reason is useful in establishing rational *means* for determined ends, it fails when it is expected to establish the

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[50] Peter Hodgson, *Winds of the Spirit: A Constructive Christian Theology* (London, SCM Press Ltd, 1994), p.130.

[51] Ibid., p.131. The core issue in such an appropriation of communicative rationality for theological purposes is of course whether such a model must in the end define *truth* as procedural rather than substantive. God, for Habermas, is a structure, whereas God for Hodgson, surely remains in some sense, a loving being?

[52] Thomas Guarino, "Between Foundationalism and Nihilism: Is *Phronesis* the *Via Media* for Theology?" *Theological Studies* 54 (1993), pp.37-54, p.49.

[53] See Don S. Browning and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, ed. *Habermas, Modernity and Public Theology*, pp.32-42.

ends themselves.

"The major problem with instrumental rationality is also obvious: its relative inability to define ends for the polity and culture on other than either an instrumental or a merely intuitive basis".[54]

Consequently what is required are paradigms of rationality that are as successfully public in their scope, as that of instrumental rationality once was.

"If publicness is to be exhaustively defined by instrumental reason, then the adventures of reason will never again inform an authentically public civil discourse in the realm of polity - the realm where finally we all must meet."
[55]

Tracy's deep concern that theology should meet the demands of public rationality makes him suggest that both the Frankfurt school and revisionist theology share a lot in common,

"The central demand for the continuing refinement of genuinely critical theory and for its universal applicability to all experience and all symbol systems is the chief distinguishing characteristic of both the contemporary revisionist model for fundamental theology and the 'revisionist' model for critical social theory exemplified in the work of the Frankfurt school."[56]

Nevertheless Tracy takes issue with Habermas on a number of points,

"That distinct cognitive spheres (science, morality, art) possess distinct validity-confirming modes of argument is philosophically true",[57]

"[nevertheless] there is no argument in Habermas that disallows [the validity claims of the religions],... therefore no good reason, either philosophically or sociologically, for a modern critical social theorist to so confine his analysis

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[54] David Tracy, *Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, p.8.

[55] Ibid., p.14.

[56] David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1975), p.276.

[57] Ibid., p.34.

to three and only three cognitive spheres as to stop short of even asking the questions of validity claims of the religions as they have been analyzed by both philosophers of religion and theologians."[58]

To insist, as Habermas does, on three cognitive spheres alone is to severe theology from any links it may have in tradition and society. Furthermore, as Tracy points out, Habermas's understanding of the cognitive sphere of morality does not show how discussion of the good, can be related to discussion of the right. Allied to all of these criticisms, Tracy concludes, therefore, that Habermas's refusal to include religion as a cognitive sphere can only stem from an entrenched commitment to a fully-fledged theory of *social evolution*, which imagines an all too easy and untroubled progression from myth to metaphysics to communicative rationality.[59]

In fairness to Habermas it has to be said that, to an extent, he is less concerned to deliberately exclude religion than Tracy seems to suggest.[60] Habermas's aversion to religion as a cognitive sphere is not on the grounds that religion offers *no* validity-confirming modes of argument, for Habermas recognises that religion can be a source of existential consolation. Habermas's objection to religion as a cognitive sphere is on the grounds that ultimately, the truth claims

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[58] Ibid., p.37.

[59] Ibid., p.33.

[60] See Habermas's own account of a theological truth claim in the section entitled "The Truth Claim of Theological Discourse", in *Habermas, Modernity and Public Theology*, ed. Browning/Fiorenza.

of religion cannot be publicly validated because they are, by virtue of being religious, *totalising* truth claims! But where is Habermas's justification for this? Why must a theological truth claim, by virtue of being religious, be a totalising truth claim? Revisionist theology's commitment to particularism is not in doubt. For Tracy, as we shall see shortly, the universal is only accessed *through* the particular.

3. Communicative Rationality Without an Eschaton

Habermas's reluctance to accept religion as a significant cognitive sphere hampers his project fatally and betrays vestiges of a foundationalist conception of reason that he himself would be at pains to eradicate. The fact that theological truth claims must maintain a cognitive dimension *and* that religion, as the cultural expression of those truth claims must deserve a place in any postmetaphysical reconstruction of reason, go hand-in-hand.[61]

Until very recently Habermas has consistently failed to recognise the importance of the existential and aesthetic in the realm of the individual. In his article "Private Faith or Public Religion? An Assessment of Habermas's Changing View of Religion", William B. Meyer has suggested that Habermas has recently changed his mind about religion and thus offers hope to theologians wishing to

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[61] In Chapter Four we shall examine Adina Davidovich's attempt to demarcate the province of meaning that is constituted by religion. According to her reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* Kant held to an understanding of religion as that which provides the unity of reason. See Adina Davidovich, *Religion as a Province of Meaning* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1993).

develop some of Habermas's views in a theological context.[62] Nevertheless, how far Habermas can be taken to be a theological ally is debatable. Agnes Heller has criticised Habermas for the neglect of any understanding of human affectivity in his work,

> "the lack of the sensuous experiences of hope and despair, of venture and humiliation, is discernible in the structure of his theory: the creature-like aspects of human beings are missing."[63]

Lacking a means of understanding important areas of human experience, Habermas's theological potential is limited. It is certainly the case that in earlier works Habermas maintained that the content of Christianity has become secularised (conformed to instrumental rationality), and that neither posivitism nor expressivism can offer any real answers in the wake of the conceptual and ethical vacuum left by religion,

> "Neither science nor the arts can claim to be the heir to religion. In this respect only a discursive ethics and communicative rationality can turn out to substitute for the holy."[64]

Consequently, in Habermas's formulation of the theological problem (such that he would be prepare to admit to there being one), the substitute for the holy is a "communicative structure" that facilitates human knowing, whereby,

> "'God' becomes the name for a communicative structure that forces men, on

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[62] See for example, William B Meyer, "Private Faith or Public Religion? An Assessment of Habermas's Changing View of Religion", *Theology* 75 (1995), pp.371-391.

[63] Agnes Heller, "Habermas and Marxism", *Habermas: Critical Debates* (London, Macmillan, 1982), ed. John B. Thompson and D. Held, p.21.

[64] Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action,* Vol 2 (Boston, Beacon Press, 1986), p.140.

pain of a loss of their humanity, to go beyond their accidental, empirical nature, to encounter one another indirectly, that is across an objective something that they themselves are not".[65]

While Habermas's critical social theory does strive to include all voices in the public arena, and shows us a different way of viewing otherness, he nevertheless excludes the possibility of religion exercising any kind of role in the public space at all. As Anne Fortin-Melkevik says in summing up the logic of Habermas's project it,

"necessarily seems to relegate religious experience, religion, religious language and theological discourse to oblivion or irrationalism".[66]

Habermas's description of postmetaphysical reason does in the final analysis provide yet more evidence of instrumental reason's failings.[67] Nevertheless, in Habermas's response to the problem of instrumental rationality he ignores the fact that *faith* might still have a role to play in a postmetaphysical context. Faith might in fact even be more vitally important in disabusing belief of its cognitive privilege than communicative action. Furthermore, it may be that faith provides communicative action with a *telos* that is more adequate to the demands of the contemporary situation than anything Habermas has to offer. This is ultimately

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[65] Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, p.120.

[66] Anne Fortin-Melkevik, "The Reciprocal Exclusiveness of Modernity and Religion among Contemporary Thinkers: Jürgen Habermas and Marcel Gauchet", p.66.

[67] The work of John Finnis "Moral Absolutes: Tradition, Revision and Truth in *The Thomist* 58 (1994), pp.348-353, may in fact be a more fruitful line for theologians to pursue. Finnis attempts to do natural law ethics without the pitfalls and thus can be a bridge between Habermas and MacIntyre, for whom all goods are particular. For Finnis *some* goods are universally acknowledged as goods.

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Charles Davis's criticism of Habermas.[68] While Habermas's stress on communicative rationality can help theologians overcome the distortions of instrumentalist understandings of reason, it nevertheless does not provide us with the kind of *hope* that is necessary to bring about the radical transformation that Habermas seeks. Insofar as communicative action has a *telos* it must be thought of as the future unity of mankind. In Habermas's formulation the achievement of this goal is dependent upon the viability of an "ideal speech situation". This is a complex part of Habermas's arguments and, notwithstanding the many problems associated with it, is an idea that from the outset struggles to escape metaphysics. Habermas disagrees of course, arguing that the *telos* in communicative action is proportionate to "un-coerced intersubjective understanding",

> "To be sure the concept of communicative rationality does contain a utopian perspective; in the structures of undamaged intersubjectivity can be found a necessary condition for individuals reaching an understanding among themselves without coercion, as well as for the identity of an individual coming to an understanding with himself or herself without force."[69]

Nevertheless, though there may be some kind of goal in Habermas's programme of communicative action, it is Davis's argument that such a *telos* cannot be enough to justify us in believing in the *actual* possibility of transformed and emancipated society, and this because,

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[68] See Chapter 11 ,'Communicative Rationality and the Grounding of Religious Hope' in Charles Davis, *Religion and The Making of Society,* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp.188-205.

[69] Jürgen Habermas, "Reply to my Critics", *Habermas: Critical Debates* (Cambridge, Mass; MIT Press, 1982), ed. John B. Thompson and D. Held, p.228.

> "the possibilities inherent in human action may be, in fact constantly are, frustrated by the negative contingencies of human existence, notably sickness and death and irrational human evil."[70]

Habermas even seems to admit to this. In describing his theory of communicative action he says,

> "This perspective comprises only formal determinations of the communicative infrastructure of possible forms of life... it does not extend to the concrete shape of an exemplary life-form."[71]

Consequently, if this is the case, Davis is right when he says,

> "Secular hope [Habermas's] without religion cannot affirm future fulfilment, even partial, with certitude, however promising the present, but must be content with degrees of probability."[72]

In the final analysis therefore, Habermas cannot provide us with the *real* possibility of an authentic or good life. The hope inherent in communicative action stumbles in the face of suffering and evil. Transformative *praxis* comes up against a brick-wall and has no way around it. Consequently, as we shall see further in Chapter Three, the life of faith and the theological truth claims that spring from it, must be distinguished from Habermas's project. Firstly, because merely to differentiate reason into different rationality complexes will not alone, prevent the return of cognitive privilege and totalisation in some form or another. What is needed is a more radical transformation altogether. Secondly, because what faith provides is precisely that *transformative principle,* that has a real *hope*

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[70] Charles Davis, *Religion and The Making of Society*, p.202.

[71] Ibid., p.228.

[72] Ibid., p.202.

that is not frustrated by suffering and evil. This hope is not a new set of theories or foundational propositions, nor a body of objective knowledge, nor even a communicative structure whose goal is the future unity of mankind. It is a hope with an ultimate end, a *telos*, an *eschaton*. It is an ultimate end which furthermore makes *all* communicative action possess ultimate significance. It moves beyond the *end*less chatter of modernity, to a life of transformed and transformative action. What theological truth claims, informed by the hope that faith offers, can serve to do, is to unsettle and frustrate all those forms of discourse that are ultimately *opposed* to transformation.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this Chapter concurs with Alistair McFadyen when he says,

> "public meaning is not *given* by a present and unlimited order of power; it is
> a future, eschatological goal which we seek for and anticipate in our
> communication and action."[73]

In this Chapter I have demonstrated how the inadequacies of modernity's model of reason have made the question of a public rationality a burning issue. I have discussed Jürgen Habermas's model of public rationality as an attempt to find a way around the problems of modernity without recourse to an ultimate goal. I have highlighted those areas in Habermas that theologians can learn from and pointed to those areas in theology that Habermas can learn from. The conclusion to this Chapter is that what Habermas lacks is an adequate *telos*. The *telos* of

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[73] Alistair McFadyen, "Truth as Mission: The Christian Claim to Universal Truth in a Pluralist Public World", *Scottish Journal of Theology* 46 (1992), 437-456, p.453.

communicative action is too tied to *procedural* norms to make possible the radical transformation of human finitude in the face of suffering and evil.

CHAPTER THREE

ON THEOLOGICAL TRUTH AND *PHRONESIS*

"It is a mark of the trained mind never to expect more precision in the treatment of any subject than the nature of that subject permits"   Aristotle[1]

"Theology in postmodernity must reorient itself to wisdom rather than knowledge. Wisdom is the means of integrating what modernity and postmodernity alike have torn asunder, metaphysics and morals, theory and practice, fact and value."

Kevin Vanhoozer[2]

Introduction

In Chapter Two we have seen that neither instrumental nor communicative understandings of reason provide all that is needed for an adequate theological response to the problems of modernity. We have seen that Habermas's model of reason as communicative action attempts to avoid the foundationalist tendency to privilege one truth over another and thus facilitate the transformation of the human situation. My criticism of Habermas has been that without an ultimate goal, it is difficult to see how he can make the radical transformation of the human situation a *real* possibility. If we wish to argue that *faith* - that which theological truth claims are expressive of - succeeds in facilitating the radical transformation that Habermas hopes for, then we need to show what form of rationality might legitimate such faith. This Chapter sets out to do this by first

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[1] Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1953), Book 1:3;1094b13, tr. J.A.K. Thompson.

[2] Kevin Vanhoozer, "The Trials of Truth: Mission, Martyrdom, and the Epistemology of the Cross", in the forthcoming *To Stake A Claim*, (Orbis Press).

examining how faith can facilitate radical transformation without totalisation, i.e., the cognitive privilege of one truth over another, then by examining the way that *phronesis* models of rationality can legitimate such faith. It is the argument of this Chapter that the move to *praxis* understandings of faith is to be welcomed.[3] Nevertheless, if a theological truth claim is to prevent the loss of critical adjudication as truth, then it can best be done by the adoption of *phronesis* models of rationality. The benefit that *phronesis* brings to theology, is a form of criticism that is *both* an epistemological act *and* a moral act.

1. On the Problem of Totalisation and Praxis Understandings of Faith

The difficulty of arriving at an adequate understanding of a theological truth claim in a postmodern context cannot be under-estimated. If theological truth is to satisfy its past and its future it has to avoid all totalising influences, foundationalisms, and suggestions that theological truth possesses a cognitive privilege over other truth. At the same time however, it must attempt to maintain theological truth claims as universal claims. This is no easy matter. For many thinkers theological truth claims *by their very nature* depend upon notions like totalisation and cognitive privilege. They will argue that theological truth claims

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[3]   Although of Aristotelian origin and of major significance in Marx's thought, in theological discussions the term *praxis* is usually most closely associated with theologies of liberation. A fundamental claim of such theologies concerns a move from the centrality of ortho*doxy* to the centrality of ortho*praxy*, where knowing and doing exist in a dialectically dependent relationship that issues in virtue as a criterion for truth. See for example; G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1974); L. Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator* (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1980); J. Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1975).

are *entirely* dependent upon a model of truth as universal adequacy; that if true at all, a theological truth must be true in all particular instances of itself or not at all. Consequently, the idea of a theological truth claim that does not assert a privilege over all other truths is one that does not make much sense for many thinkers. Randy Maddox, to take but one example, argues like this and claims that a theological truth claim is not something that makes any sense once the notion of cognitive privilege has been ruled out of court.[4] If he is right then the idea of a revisable theological truth claim is indeed a contradiction in terms. This is therefore the key question. By demanding the disavowal of all totalising influences, can sense be made of a *theological* truth claim, especially if, as we have argued in Chapter Two an eschatological dimension seems to be a necessary element in theological truth? Once the notion of a total and foundational privileged truth is removed from theology, is it still dealing in the world of universals?

Of course one alternative suggestion is that theological truth claims are *non-cognitive*, entirely mystical claims. This is an idea that is not without its appeal. Much postmodern, deconstructionist theology makes this claim and for good reasons.[5] Non-cognitive explanations of theological truth offer an easy escape from the problem of universals and particulars. With them, we can collapse all

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[4] Randy L. Maddox, "Contemporary Hermeneutic Philosophy and Theological Studies" in *Religious Studies* 21:4 (1985), pp.517-529, p.529.

[5] See Part 4 of D Z. Phillips' *Faith After Foundationalism* (Colarado, Westview Press, 1995), for a postfoundationalist account of concept formation in religion, pp.255ff.

uncomfortable distinctions between truth and falsehood, and slip easily into the "non-logocentric interstices" that lie between modernity's false and alienating dichotomies.[6] Inviting as this might seem as a solution to the problem, once taken, we find that we have walked straight into the jaws of another trap. To retain any kind of commitment to publicly accessible truth claims or models of revisable theological truth, we must defend at the very least, the belief that theological truth claims have a cognitive *dimension*. Whether that dimension also entails a privileged place in a cognitive hierarchy, is the question that is open to doubt. How then can a theological truth claim occupy a place in a cognitive framework without of necessity demanding a privileged place in that framework? One answer to this question is to see faith - that which theological truth is expressive of - in terms of a *praxis* which issues in the radical critique of all cognitive privilege. Conceived in this manner, faith can be capable of facilitating a radical transformation of the human situation. Consequently, a theological truth claim is misunderstood if it is thought to demand either cognitive or theoretical privilege. Faith, in the light of an ultimate end, can in fact be *disruptive* of cognitive and theoretical privilege.

It is modernity that has insisted that a truth claim rests upon the idea of cognitive privilege, and that a *theological* truth claim, understood as an orthodoxy, rests upon the idea of theoretical privilege. Consequently, if we

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[6] See Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp.8-9.

wished to maintain at all that theological truth claims were cognitive claims, i.e., pertaining to matters of fact, then there appeared no way of avoiding the conflict that inevitably ensued between different theological truth claims arising from different religious cultures. For modernity, orthodoxies must collide, they cannot be reconciled with one another or within the public sphere without radically altering what we mean when we talk of truth.[7]

Moreover, because of the dominance of positivist and verificationist models of legitimation within the epistemology of modernity, faith has been misunderstood. Faith has not only been attacked for relying upon notions of cognitive privilege and cognitive hierarchy, but has been denounced as the major factor contributing to their maintenance. The extent of the critical power of faith in modernity has not therefore been recognised and has been immediately curtailed by the extent to which modernity's own epistemology could exercise a truly critical function. Consequently, modernity's relegation of faith to the sphere of personal interest needs to be resisted. The understanding of legitimation that drives modernity's reluctance to admit that faith might possess a cognitive dimension remains more committed to a type of certainty foreign to the subject matter faith is concerned

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[7] Again, revisionist approaches in theology have been prepared to make such alterations and by being committed to some form of public rationality, have attempted to hold onto a critical function for theology in the process of that alteration. In discussing the achievements of revisionist and liberal theology and the challenges facing revisionists and liberals in the future, James Buckley in *The Modern Theologians* emphasises the importance of the potential contribution revisionists can make to this question when he says, "revisionists and liberals ought to continually to address the issues raised by the debate over 'truth' (e.g., is truth correspondence to reality, pragmatic effectiveness, disclosure? Do we need a theory of truth and method?" See James J. Buckley, "Revisionists and Liberals" in *The Modern Theologians* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1997), ed. David F. Ford, p.326.

with, than it is at first apparent. It is the case that modernist criticisms of faith appear to forget too readily, Aristotle's advice about expecting more precision in the treatment of a subject than the subject itself permits.[8]

In moving to a *praxis* paradigm for understanding faith, we can escape the idea that theological truth claims necessitate cognitive privilege without rejecting the idea that faith has a cognitive dimension. For Charles Davis, faith is that which ensures the radical transformation of the human situation *precisely because of its capacity to disrupt all cognitive privileges.* It treads a tightrope between fideism and foundationalism, objectivism and relativism, nihilism and idolatry, metaphysics and morals,

> "Religious faith may be seen as following a narrow ridge between the two abysses of nihilism and idolatry.... Religious faith is best viewed not as a set of beliefs, but as an unrestricted openness to Reality. As such, it is a critical foundation for the permanent argument that constitutes political society."[9]

Nevertheless, to successfully defend a cognitive dimension for faith, we must demonstrate that faith can facilitate an authentic critical moment. This moment must neither be borne out of a position of cognitive privilege, nor contribute to the maintenance of cognitive privilege.[10] Such a critical moment for Davis, has

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[8] See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* Book 1:3:1094b13.

[9] Charles Davis, *Religion and the Making of Society* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.37.

[10] Davis's critique of religious orthodoxy makes clearer the critical authenticity of faith as the critique of cognitive privilege, because faith is mediated through *praxis.* The radical consequences of this for theology are that, "Theology loses its boundaries as an independent discipline, because the only appropriate context for the conscious articulation of praxis is a

to do with the conceptual 'space' it makes available for the individual that,

> "widens the horizon within which the person, thinks, judges, decides and acts".[11]

For Davis, a revisable theological truth claim is therefore best preserved by supposing belief to be ideologically-loaded. It is only through a process of ideology critique that theological truth claims can function as vehicles of human transformation. This process must furthermore be extended into the tradition that theological truth claims come from,

> "the Christian tradition, like other traditions, is not exclusively a source of truth and value, but a vehicle of untruth and false values, and thus must be subject to a critique of ideology and critically appropriated, not simply made one's own in an assimilative process of interpretation".[12]

That this move towards a paradigm of action need not end in a slide towards epistemological relativism is shown towards the end of this Chapter, where a *phronesis* model of legitimation is introduced.

Modernity's critique of faith has often suggested that it is inevitable that faith will assert a privilege over reason. The revisability of theological truth based upon *praxis* understandings of faith can also lead to claims for the priority of faith over reason. But this is not necessarily a bad thing as long as faith is

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theory of the development of society in its total reality." See, *Religion and the Making of Society*, p.91.

[11] Charles Davis, *Religion and The Making of Society,* p.35.

[12] Charles Davis, *Theology and Political Society* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1978), p.25.

defined in terms of action. It is not necessarily the case that the priority of faith must conclude with the conquest of reason. It is possible that the kind of priority that faith must have over reason can be thought of in terms of the priority of loving action.[13] The priority of faith over reason would be fideistic if conceived of in terms of a verificationist or positivist paradigm of knowledge, however faith need not be conceived of in these terms. For Maurice Blondel faith is to be thought of in terms of the primacy of action.[14] For Blondel, faith may precede reason in matters of action because love is foundational for action, not knowledge.[15] Consequently, when we speak of the totalisation or priority of faith, we are speaking of the totalisation and priority of *love*. In *L'action* Blondel develops a phenomenology of human action that attempts to show that the human will is never equal to itself, that is, it never finds an adequate resolution in any of its actions. Every action is a self-transcending entity. For Blondel therefore, the logic of action demands the realm of the spiritual, and ultimately a revelation which needs dogmatic formulation. Furthermore, the logic of action alone cannot decide which actions are truly loving and which are not. Only in

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[13] See Paul Ricoeur, "Love and Justice" in *Radical Pluralism and Truth: David Tracy and the Hermeneutics of Religion* (New York, Crossroad, 1991), ed. W.G. Jeanrond and J.L. Rike, pp.187ff, for a fuller understanding of love in this context.

[14] In Charles Davis' *Religion and the Making of Society*, p.93, Davis brings out an interesting connection here between the work of Blondel and William James. James cites Blondel in two of his works and appears to draw considerable inspiration from him. Davis suggests however that Blondel's work is best not interpreted as pragmatism in the sense of maintaining an *oppositional* distinction between thought and action.

[15] See Maurice Blondel, *L'Action* (1893) in Olivia Blanchette, "Introduction to Maurice Blondel" in *Action (1893): Essay on a Critique of Life and the Science of Practice*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp.xvii-xviii; and commentators James M. Sommerville, Maurice Blondel 1861-1949" in *Thought* 36 (1961), pp.371-2.

allegiance with a series of actions (e.g., a tradition) can such a decision be made. What Blondel tells us is that the critical moment of faith is not a moment which either seeks the false certainty or the pivotal foundations of modernity's epistemology, and can thus be truly *transformational*. Blondel's emphasis upon the embodiment of thought, long before postmodernists made the idea fashionable, coupled with Davis's defence of the power of faith to disrupt all cognitive privileges, can therefore help to put flesh on the idea of faith as a transformative principle which is disruptive of all bids to totalise. That there *is* a totalising dimension within such an understanding of faith, cannot be denied fully. However, to understand such a totalising dimension in the manner that Blondel conceives of action can serve both to reveal the horizons of our thinking *and* acting more fully to us. The extent of this revelation is summed up in this quote from Blondel,

> "For it is not from thought that faith passes over into the act, it is from practice that it draws down a divine light for the spirit. God acts in this action and that is why the thought that follows it is richer by an infinity than that which proceeds it. It has entered into a new world where no philosophical speculation can lead it or follow it."[16]

If we follow this route, and understand the priority that faith has over reason as the priority of loving action, we are still nevertheless confronted with the question of what model of reason may be adequate to such an understanding of faith. A *phronesis* understanding of reason is a model which offers a possible answer to this question, and we shall explore it below.

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[16] See Maurice Blonde, *L'Action* (1893), quoted in Charles Davis, *Religion and the Making of Society*, p.95.

2. On the Promise of Phronesis

The importance of *phronesis* for reflections upon theological method is in the first instance related to a conception of a practice in the realm of the intellect that reveals something of the nature of the good life. In Thomas Guarino's article, "Between Foundationalism and Nihilism: Is *Phronesis* the *Via Media* for Theology", Guarino concludes by arguing that in the final analysis *phronesis* is *not* sufficient for the demands of theology.[17] Where *phronesis* fails is in respect of its inability to deal adequately with the "cognitive status of credal and doctrinal statements".[18] What Guarino implicitly recognises is that *phronesis* conceptions of rationality have the potential to upset the cognitive status of theological truth claims by dissolving the privilege they enjoy over other truth claims. What Guarino is concerned about is that a *phronesis* model of rationality might not do enough to protect the cognitive privilege that theological truth claims enjoy in a cognitive hierarchy. But to hold these concerns is merely to return us to the problem of public accessibility. The great strength of a *phronesis* model of reason is precisely in that it offers a way of making sense *without privileging one cognitive insight over another*. Charles Allen's definition of *phronesis* highlights its strengths well,

> "phronesis is the historically implicated, communally nurtured ability to make
> good sense of relatively singular contexts in ways appropriate to their relative

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[17] Thomas Guarino,'Between Foundationalism and Nihilism: Is *Phronesis* the *Via Media* for Theology', *Theological Studies* 54 (1993), pp.37-54.

[18] Ibid., p.52.

singularity."[19]

Using distinctions made by Richard Bernstein, Charles Allen helpfully unpacks each of the terms in this definition to explore how "phronetic sense making", can enable us to hold on to more of our theological heritage than previously thought possible.[20] Allen lists five aspects of *phronesis* models of reason that he suggests theologians can benefit from; 1. *phronesis* is employed in making good sense; 2. it is communally nurtured; 3. it is historically implicated; 4. it makes good sense of relatively singular contexts; and 5. most importantly, it makes sense of its subject matter in a manner appropriate to the subject matter.[21] The great value of a *phronesis* understanding of rationality according to Allen, is therefore the help it gives us in avoiding the either/or dilemma of objectivism and foundationalism on the one hand, and relativism and subjectivism, on the other.[22] In the same way that for Allen a *phronesis* understanding of rationality can avoid the either/or choice between objectivism and subjectivism, it can likewise allow theologians to avoid an either/or choice between the universal scope of a theological truth claim and its particular context. With *phronesis*

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[19] Charles W. Allen, "The Primacy of *Phronesis:* A Proposal for Avoiding Frustrating Tendencies in Our Conceptions of Rationality", *Journal of Religion* 69 (1989), pp.359-374, p.363.

[20] See Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), pp.182-206.

[21] Charles Allen, "The Primacy of *Phronesis*', p.363.

[22] For Allen 'objectivism' is exemplified in thinkers such as Martin Hollis and P F. Strawson. See Charles Allen, "The Primacy of *Phronesis*", p.360.

theological truth can be both universal and particular, metaphysical and moral.

Aristotle's notion of *phronesis* as prudence or practical wisdom is of course, at the heart of the retrieval of *phronesis* understandings of reason.[23] Although too much can be made of a retrieval of Aristotle's views in today's situation, at the same time, Aristotle's contribution to non-instrumentalist models of reason in general cannot be overlooked.[24] It is therefore a legitimate question to ask in the first instance what Aristotle meant by *phronesis,* and what role it occupied in his schema. *Phronesis* is discussed in Book 6 of *The Nichomachean Ethics* on "Intellectual Virtues", and is one of the five modes of thought by which truth is reached. *Episteme* (scientific knowledge), *techne* (art or technical skill), *nous* (intuition) and *sophia* (wisdom) are the four other intellectual virtues. In the Aristotelian schema, the intellectual virtues are described as belonging to that part of the soul which is rational. They are not intended in the first instance to be understood as *moral* virtues.[25] Whereas *sophia* is the highest of the intellectual virtues because it is knowledge of that which is by nature most precious, the value of *phronesis* is that it is concerned with the actual practice

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[23] See Aristotle *The Nicomachean Ethics,* Book VI:1139b18-36.

[24] Allen offers useful advice in his article 'The Primacy of Phronesis', when he says that respectful consideration of the history of an idea is needed more than a slavish reproduction of it - a view he finds confirmed in Richard Bernstein, see *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism,* pp.47-48.

[25] See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book VI:I.

of intellectual virtue.[26] All other intellectual virtues for Aristotle imply prudence/practical wisdom, and it is in this sense that *phronesis* has a special part to play.

> "prudence does not exercise authority over wisdom or over the higher part of the soul, any more than the science of medicine exercises authority over health; for it does not use wisdom, but provides for its realisation; and therefore issues orders not to it, but for its sake." [27]

It has to be remembered that distinctive as the role of *phronesis* is in Aristotle, it is nevertheless subservient to *episteme,* scientific knowledge.[28] Where contemporary retrievals of *phronesis* understandings of rationality part company with Aristotle, is over the primacy that they wish to accord to *phronesis.* Aristotle's ultimate subordination of *phronesis* under *episteme* involves and presupposes, the either/or distinction between universal truth and particular truth that contemporary defenders of *phronesis* wish to overcome. We can, nonetheless, appropriate ourselves of the best of Aristotle's insights to help tackle the problem of the relationship between universals and particulars. The idea of a *phronesis* understanding of reason, stressing that reason is something we do can be borrowed from Aristotle, and put to work in theology to great effect.

Gadamer has probably done more to revive *phronesis* understandings of reason

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[26] Ibid., Book VI:VII, 1140b33.

[27] Ibid., Book VI:XIII, 1142b31.

[28] Ibid., Book VI:1139 b:20-22.

than anyone else in recent times.[29] Gadamer's analysis of understanding in the human sciences provides not only an explanation of the marginalisation of the truth claims of the human sciences generally, but also using *phronesis* models of rationality, a means by which such marginalisation can be overcome. Pre-eminently for Gadamer, the tradition of the human sciences mediates truth in a way which is in the final analysis not reducible to an external norm. Truth in the human sciences is participative and essentially disclosive.

> "the experience of historical tradition reaches far beyond those aspects of it that can be objectively investigated. It is true or untrue not only in the same conceiving which historical criticism decides, but always mediates truth in which one must try to participate."[30]

Phronesis can help overcome the marginalisation of truth in the human sciences because it is,

> "concerned with reason and with knowledge, not detached from a being that is becoming, but determined by it and determinative of it."[31]

As we shall see in a moment, and further in Chapter Six, it is Gadamer's rehabilitation of *phronesis* that promises to provide a revisionary account of theological truth claims with the powerful resource of a non-foundationalist ontology.[32]

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[29] See Thomas Guarino, "Between Foundationalism and Nihilism", pp.44ff.

[30] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* p.xxiii.

[31] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York, Crossroad, 1975), tr. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, p.278.

[32] See Guarino, "Between Foundationalism and Nihilism", p.45.

Along with Gadamer, Jurgen Habermas of course is also committed to some form of *phronesis* understanding of rationality but situates it within a different model of truth.[33] For Habermas, truth in essence involves the authentic *transformation* of human subjectivity, while for Gadamer, truth is essentially the disclosure of possibility. The difference between Habermas and Gadamer therefore concerns the difference between models of truth as transformation and models of truth as disclosure. Gadamer is influenced by Heidegger and holds to the view that the manifestation of truth involves a disclosure-concealment dialectic.[34] The problem that Habermas finds with Gadamer concerns whether a model of hermeneutical philosophy which is content to believe that the power of conversation alone is sufficient in the public forum (such as Gadamer's), can not only provide answers to questions of aesthetic meaning, but can offer truly critical strategies for societal praxis. Habermas thinks that Gadamer's model places too much faith in the similarities of context between our present social, political and cultural situation, and those of the Greek *polis*. He argues that our present technologically dominated context is much more systematically distorted than Gadamer allows for.

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[33] Ibid., p.50.

[34] On manifestation of truth as disclosure-concealment see, Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1962), section 44 "Dasein, Disclosedness and Truth"; also *Basic Writings,* ed. David F. Krell (London, Harper & Row, 1977), p.149-87, "The Origin of the Work of Art". Kevin Vanhoozer furthermore describes Tracy as a "theologian of manifestation" See *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.168.

The Habermas/Gadamer debate is of course complex. Nevertheless, in essence Habermasian criticisms of Gadamer's model of hermeneutics think that *Truth and Method* should have been more accurately titled *Truth OR Method*, with Gadamer's choice being *for* truth over *against* method. Consequently, such critics disagree with the ontological and contextualist emphasis in Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy, and argue that a more moderate position on method and theory needs to be recovered.[35] Gadamerian critics on the other hand have responded by arguing that Habermas's "ideal speech situation" still appears transcendentalist in its structure, and may be so divorced from present realities that it is useless as a means of judging alternatives. As Gadamer himself says,

> "What man needs is not just the persistent posing of ultimate questions, but the sense of what is feasible, what is possible, what is correct, here and now."[36]

Although generally supportive of Habermas, Seyla Benhabib also criticizes him for an understanding of the self which is "disembedded and disembodied".[37] While William C. Placher also argues that Habermas's appeal to a democratic consensus may be compelling to those brought up in the West, but can offer little to those operating with different political ideals.[38]

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[35] Paul Ricoeur, "The Task of Hermeneutics" *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation,* tr. John B. Thompson (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981), p.60.

[36] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* p.xxxviii.

[37] Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1992), p.151.

[38] See William C. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Kentucky, Westminster/John Knox, 1989), Chapter 5.

David Tracy has identified both transformation models of truth and disclosure models of truth at work in theology. As a revisionist theologian, committed to the revisability of theological truth claims he can see the value of *both* Habermas's and Gadamer's versions of truth[39]. Tracy suggests that both give rise to theological analogues in hermeneutical theology and political theology. Hermeneutical theology, implicitly or explicitly, recalls Gadamer's model of truth, and political theology, implicitly or explicitly, recalls Habermas's. Nevertheless, instead of choosing between these two models, theology must pool them together. Tracy insists that a marriage of both a disclosure model of truth and a transformation model must admit to the distinctive nature of each model, yet must *work towards preventing their separation.*

> "all good theory is grounded in the authentic praxis of intellectual integrity and cognitive self-transcendence.. all real knowledge is in some sense participatory. Yet those realities.. can be distinguished without being separated. "Saying the truth" is distinct from, although never separate from, "doing the truth"."[40]

Where political and liberation theologies incline towards a transformation model of truth, Tracy's hope is that they may be a productive corrective to the emphasis upon disclosure that is in fundamental and systematic theologies.

> "insofar as truth is always best understood as basically transformative in character rather than either metaphysical or disclosive, praxis theology sublates the claims to truth of all alternative formulations articulated in non-praxis oriented fundamental and systematic theologies".[41]

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[39] See David Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, p.73 for more on Tracy and the Gadamer versus Habermas debate.

[40] Ibid., p.77.

[41] Ibid., p.73.

For Tracy, therefore, the use of a *phronesis* model of reason necessitates the recognition of at least two models of truth. Both truth as disclosure (with its most explicit manifestation in various paradigms of hermeneutical theology), and truth as transformation (as expressed in paradigms of political theology), must be seen as mutually dependent. Consequently, only in-so-far as both models of truth are held together can theology be successful at making the distinction between "saying the truth" and "doing the truth" a constructive one.[42]

However, although Tracy is conscious of the demands of social transformation, in the final analysis, the transformation model of truth serves to underline the "foundational reality of praxis as transformed authentic <u>subjectivity</u>".(emphasis mine)[43] This emphasises a point we will stress later about Tracy's continuing commitment to the goals of liberal modernity because it is *subjectivity* that is authentically transformed by theological truth for Tracy.[44]

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[42] To what extent Tracy can be paralleled beside other typical models of praxis-theology is debated in Dermot A. Lane, "David Tracy and the Debate About Praxis" in *Radical Pluralism and Truth* (Crossroads, New York 1991), ed. Werner G. Jeanrond and Jennifer L. Rike.

[43] David Tracy, *Analogical Imagination,* p.71.

[44] As we shall see, Tracy will attempt to convince us that this is not a form of subjectivity conceived of in terms of modernity's epistemology. Tracy wants to return to the primacy of truth as disclosure and to do so he find an ally in postmodern forms of thought. As we shall see further in Chapter Six, for Tracy, theology in its postmodern context must attempt to move beyond the subject of modernity, *beyond* the turn to language, to "difference" and to the "Other",

"Postmodernity begins by trying to think the unthought of modernity. Beyond the early modern turn to the purely autonomous self-grounding subject, beyond even the more recent turn to language (the first great contemporary challenge to modern subjectivism) lies the quintessential turn of postmodernity itself - the turn to the other." See David Tracy, "Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity" in *Readings in Modern Theology: Britain and America* (London, SPCK, 1988), ed. R. Gill, p.229.

3. On Legitimation in Zagzebski's Model

The central problem with theological uses of *phronesis* models of rationality concerns the way in which theological truth claims can be judged/legitimated, yet it is also here that *phronesis* holds out the most promise to theology. As we have already said, when the problem of legitimation is raised it involves a notion of what constitutes epistemological justification, that is out of place in a post-positivistic context.[45]

Linda Zagzebski is one who has taken up the opportunities and challenge that *phronesis* models of rationality present for the problem of legitimation and theological truth.[46] Zagzebski proposes a model of rationality that suggests that what is rational is embedded in moral behaviour. This model of rationality is one that offers much promise when applied to religious belief, because,

> "The model of what a good person does when she acts is a model of rationality which .. can illuminate what a good thinking person does when she forms

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[45] See the section by Zagzebski "Problems in the notion of Justification" in *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp.29ff, where she uses William Alston and Alvin Plantinga to show that there are not only different notions of what *constitutes* justification in epistemology, but that, "the conceptual confusion over justification has led to the present impasse between internalists and externalists", p.31.

[46] See Linda Zagzebski *Virtues of the Mind; An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge*; also "The Place of Phronesis in the Methodology of Theology', in Stephen T. Davis, ed. *Philosophy and Theological Discourse* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997), pp.204-223.

beliefs."[47]

For Zagzebski, epistemological theories always involve concepts that are directly ethical, e.g., epistemic duty, responsibility, and so on. However, these concepts are linked to different moral theories which influence the outcome of their application in epistemology. The situation we are in, wherein we are forced to choose between internalist and externalist models of reason is largely a result of the application within epistemology, of concepts derived from "act-based" moral theories. Following a train of thought established by Ernest Sosa, Lorraine Code and J. Montmarquet, Zagzebski has therefore attempted to articulate an alternative model which centralises the concept of *virtue* in epistemology.[48]

Zagzebski's model suggests that the notion of *phronesis* is something which can govern *both* believing and acting and is a quality which allows a person to see how they should act. In the same way that virtue cannot be reduced to the mere performance of right acts, Zagzebski believes that epistemology cannot be reduced to the question of legitimation,

> "virtue theorists claim that it is a mistake to begin an investigation in moral philosophy with the question of when an act is right or wrong. I accept this position and think that similarly it is a mistake to begin an investigation in epistemology with the question of when a belief is justified or unjustified."[49]

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[47] Ibid., p.206.

[48] Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind* p.xiii.

[49] Ibid., p.207.

For Zagzebski, knowledge is wrongly thought of as true justified belief, with justification as something that converts true belief into knowledge. This understanding has not enabled us to understand religious belief adequately and has led to the crises of pluralism. The model Zagzebski proposes is therefore one which promises a more adequate understanding of religious belief by seeing knowledge as "true belief arising out of acts of intellectual virtue".[50] In the same way that moral virtues and vices are within our control in the sphere of behaviour, so too are intellectual virtues and vices within our control in the sphere of cognition. Like moral virtues, intellectual virtues, (e.g., carefulness, thoroughness, courage, perseverance etc..) are not mere instruments or tools to achieve happiness with, but necessitate a proper balance between the different aspects of the human condition. The real question we should be asking of theological truth claims according to Zagzebski, is not can they be justified, but is the person holding them, holding them in a way which is intellectually virtuous? For Zagzebski, what this means is that a person's beliefs are rational if they conform to two basic criteria. First, are they the result of reliable belief-producing processes - Zagzebski uses the example of the guess as a true belief produced through unreliable belief-producing processes.[51] Secondly, are they

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[50] Ibid., p.207. Zagzebski finds parallels for her claims in the work of John Henry Newman. In Newman's *Essay in aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870), (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1979). "Assent" is described in terms of an act of will towards a truth that we grasp with an "illative" or instinctive sense, rather than a truth that grasps us. Bernard Lonergan and derivatively so David Tracy, have sought to develop Newman's idea further.

[51] Ibid., p.215.

motivated by a desire for truth.[52]

What Zagzebski argues, is that in the same way that *phronesis* is a form of moral judgement which is not strictly rule-governed, so too, with respect to beliefs, is it a form of epistemological judgement that is not strictly rule-governed. Consequently, she holds that in theological matters, the rationality of any belief can be tested against criteria determining whether or not such a belief would be acceptable to a person possessing *phronesis*,

> "A test for whether or not a belief is rational (justified, acceptable) is whether it would be accepted by a person with phronesis in the relevant circumstances."[53]

This is, she argues, a "strictly analogous" application of Aristotle's own *phronesis* test for moral action, except now applied to the realm of knowledge. The problem with this test, as Zagzebski herself points out, is that it involves the identification of persons with *phronesis*. This of course is both a highly individualistic project and entails a certain circularity in that, since we need to have a pre-understanding of *phronesis* in order to identify persons possessing it, we cannot then use the same behaviour as criteria.[54] However, in response to the allegation that application of the notion of *phronesis* leads to this circularity, Zagzebski argues that "no particular act can be treated as a necessary criterion

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[52] Ibid., pp.215-6.

[53] Ibid., p.214.

[54] See Nancey Murphy, "The Role of Virtue in Epistemology" in Stephen T. Davis, ed. *Philosophy and Theological Discourse*.

for having phronesis"[55] - a point which is furthermore endorsed by Murphy, when she says that the test of the rationality of religious belief ought to be in the hands not of a virtuous individual, but a "community of virtuous truth-seekers".[56]

The problem of *which* community of truth-seekers ought to be the definitive one, has of course been identified by a number of key thinkers.[57] One way around the problem is to suggest with Charles Taylor and John Finnis that certain common human values shape our practical reasoning.

If Zagzebski's model of legitimation is successful then the problem of how to judge *between* rival theological truth claims obviously appears far less daunting than previously thought. Legitimating theological truth claims may in the final analysis not be about deciding for or against them in the light of only *one* understanding of rationality. Rather, we can invert the values of the equation which normally suggests that a true belief is legitimate when it is a rational belief, to suggest that our understanding of what is rational is legitimated by the *virtuous exercise of true beliefs held with integrity*. Consequently, whether a

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[55] Linda Zagzebski, "The Place of Phronesis in the Methodology of Theology", p.218.

[56] See Nancey Murphy, "The Role of Phronesis in Epistemology", in Stephen T. Davis, ed. *Philosophy and Theological Discourse*, p.225. Note that Murphy thinks that ultimately Zagzebski's use of "reliability" as criteria for the belief-producing processes of rationality, necessitates more traditional epistemological inquiry.

[57] See, Alastair MacIntrye, *After Virtue*.

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belief is rational or not need *not* be determined by a process whereby rationality is the criteria for virtuous action, but can be determined by a process whereby virtuous action is the criteria for rationality.

A *phronesis* test could, consequently, be incorporated into the methodology of theology as a basic guide to the relative adequacy and rationality of any theological truth claim, and could ask; "Is this belief produced through reliable belief-producing processes?", and; "Is this belief motivated by the desire for truth?"[58]

Zagzebski's argument for the inclusion of *phronesis* in the methodology of theology concludes with some implications which we would do well to learn from when we consider the question of legitimation. First of all, the rationality of a person's religious belief, is not something that can be determined apart from the effect it has in the person's life.[59] Secondly, knowledge of God is not an insight obtained through the procedures of rule-governed argumentation, but is an insight gained through procedures more like the ones people use in resolving moral dilemmas. These non-rule-governed procedures reflect the Aristotelian *Doctrine of the Golden Mean*, which calls for tact, wisdom and above all

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[58] For more on the potential of virtue epistemology as a theological interlocutor, see the Chapter, "The Trials of Truth: Mission, Martyrdom and The Epistemology of the Cross", in the forthcoming, *To Stake a Claim: Christian Mission in Epistemological Crisis,* ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Orbis).

[59] Linda Zagzebski, "The Place of *Phronesis* in the Methodology of Theology", p.215.

patience.

The importance of *phronesis* for theological truth claims will be stressed again in the conclusion to this thesis, where we will see that *wisdom* may be the necessary element in judging between different imagined possibilities of goodness. Nevertheless, in this Chapter we have seen something of the potential of an alternative conception of reason that can integrate elements of truth that modernity has previously ignored.

Conclusion

In this Chapter we have seen that the totalisation of theological truth claims only becomes a problem under an epistemological rubric that insists that truth involves cognitive privilege and hierarchy. We have seen how faith suffers under this formula, and yet also how an alternative reading of the situation can see faith as the primary destabilising force behind the *dismantling* of cognitive privilege. I have therefore suggested that a certain *praxis* understanding of faith is of the essence of a theological truth claim, and need not be sacrificed to those critics -theological or otherwise - that see totalisation lurking under every bed.

The conclusion of this Chapter is that *phronesis* models of rationality offer theological truth claims significant opportunities. A *phronesis* model of rationality affords us an understanding of truth as *both* universal and particular,

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without risk of paradox. Following Zagzebski, we can argue that the rationality of any belief is not something that can be determined apart from the impact it has in the sphere of morality. Consequently, faith, understood as *praxis,* can be a meaningful, even necessary dimension, of an intellectually virtuous life. Using *phronesis* models of reason and *praxis* models of faith, theological truth claims can avoid many of the problems they find themselves confronted with in modernity. The benefits that a *phronesis* model of reason can bring to theology are evident. As a form of rationality, that is at the same time a virtue, *phronesis* can be the bridge between metaphysics and morals that theology needs so badly.

CHAPTER FOUR

ON THEOLOGICAL TRUTH
AND MEANING

"Our generation celebrates its freedom from the constricting yoke of the imperial age of grand systems. It joyfully rebels against abstract thinking and disavows preoccupation with systematicity, which none epitomized better than Immanuel Kant, according to whose daily routine the women of Königsberg allegedly set their clocks. Contemporary liberal theology claims that we can no longer believe in a universal disembodied reason that is free from the constraints of particular circumstances. Our thinking, it alleges, reflects interests and desires. Theories serve our will to power and are to be interpreted not by appeal to an aloof rationality, but through analysis of our needs and inclinations."

Adina Davidovich[1]

Introduction

The argument in Chapters One to Three has been to suggest that what might help the making of public theological truth claims, is a *praxis* model of faith and a *phronesis* understanding of rationality. However, such a suggestion does not necessarily need religion for its fulfilment, and runs the risk of making the theological dimension redundant altogether. If theological truth claims are to be hereafter understood in the light of models of rationality as virtuous action and faith as *praxis*, then why do we need to retain the epithet *theological* at all? This question, evidently faced head-on by Kant, as well as other key figures, may have a number of possible answers. It may be that religion adds nothing to

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[1] Adina Davidovich, "Kant's Theological Constructivism", in *Harvard Theological Review* 86:3 (1993), pp.323-351, p.323.

ethics; that we should simply give up talk of theological truth claims, and accept that one or other of the postmodernist's versions of modernity is actually in the final analysis the best account that we can come up with. We have already looked at one version of this option in Chapter Two and concluded that, so far, the postmodernists we have considered do not seem to offer sufficient resources upon which to base theological truth claims.

On the other hand therefore, it may be as Kant suggests that religion adds to ethics a categorical moral imperative, Duty. It may be that theological truth claims are forms of *teleological judgement* which act as regulative principles of human thought and action.[2] Although this model still may not allow us to accord religion the full autonomy as an independent sphere of meaning that some would like, it nonetheless remains a possible construal of the relationship between religion and ethics. The problem with Kant's answer to the question has long been that, once the postulate of God has served its purpose making the categorical imperative a possibility, then the meaningfulness of religion seems to be *exhausted* by ethics. However, another reading of Kant on this question suggests that far from being a provisional postulate of reason, the contemplative thought of God as the moral designer of the universe, is actually an essential

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[2] See Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, (Harper, New York 1960). Tr. T M Green and H H. Hudson, p.54. "The idea (of the good principle) itself, which reason presents to us for our zealous emulation can give us power."

component in the maintenance of the unity of reason.[3]

It is one of the premises of this thesis that while the meaningfulness and truth of religion can never be divorced from the ethical, nonetheless, ethics does not need to exhaust religion. In this Chapter, we will therefore consider an argument which does not seek to move outside the scope of Kantian philosophy generally, and yet challenges the normal understanding of Kant on the question of what religion adds to ethics. In Adina Davidovich's *Religion as a Province of Meaning,* it is shown that for Kant, religion is the essential bridge between the spheres of practical reason and pure reason, nature and freedom.[4] In demonstrating this, Davidovich makes it possible that,

> "theology need not be torn between unbounded subjectivity and unattainable objectivity."[5]

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[3] As we shall see further in Chapters Five and Six, a third option is that what religion adds to ethics is possibility. Ricoeur and Tracy's construal of this idea suggests that there is little that distinguishes religion from art, and that understanding the possibilities that religion extends to us in aesthetic terms is much more constructive than trying to define what religion might offer *beyond* art. Under this last option, religion can at least be viewed philosophically as a hermeneutical act of resistance *against* the reduction of form to content, and can be viewed phenomenologically as the cultural manifestation of such an act of resistance. With Tracy, we can understand religion as a paradigmatically *hermeneutical* phenomenon, a much messier thing than the tidy distinction between religion and culture usually suggests, and like Nicholas Lash, can argue that the kind of *oppositional* distinction made between religion and culture is a false one, "the view that religion is the name of one particular district which we may inhabit if we feel so inclined, a region of diminishing plausibility and significance, a territory quite distinct from those we know as "politics" and 'art', as 'science' and 'law' and 'economics'; this view of things, peculiar to modern Western culture, had a beginning, in the seventeenth century and is now coming to an end." Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and the End of 'Religion'* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.ix.

[4] See Adina Davidovich, *Religion as a Province of Meaning: The Kantian Foundations of Modern Theology* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1993).

[5] Ibid., p.351.

Consequently, even given the transcendental status of theological truth claims under a broad Kantian rubric, it remains possible to configure the relationship between religion and ethics in such a way as to preserve the autonomy of religion as a province of meaning. Whilst on its own, Davidovich's argument stands as an encouragement to theologians searching for ways in which theological truth claims can be public without being reduced to ethics, it can also be more strategically employed to help any theological approach charged with "experiential foundationalism" (like Tracy's), provide a robust defence. For, if valid, Davidovich's argument can help bolster approaches that seek to ground theological truth in human experience, without fear of sinking into subjectivity or relativism. It is Davidovich's claim that,

> "theology need not detach itself from its foundations in human experience to serve a general audience."[6]

We will examine how this can be possible in this Chapter.

1. On the Relationship between Religion and Ethics in Kant

Nowhere is the problem of the relationship between religion and ethics dealt with more thoroughly than in the work of Immanuel Kant. Kant's oft-quoted lines from the *Critique of Practical Reason,* aptly express his lifelong preoccupation with these twin themes.[7]

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[6] Adina Davidovich, "Kant's Theological Constructivism", in *Harvard Theological Review,* 86:3 (1993), pp.323-351, p.351.

[7] Justice cannot be expected to be done to such a massive and complex thinker as Kant in a few pages. My purpose is not to enter into too much detail on the numerous debates

"Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing wonder and awe, the oftener and the more steadily I reflect upon them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me. I do not merely conjecture them and seek them as if they were obscured in darkness, or in the transcendent region beyond my horizon: I see them before me, and I connect them directly with the consciousness of my own existence".[8]

Kant is of course a pivotal figure in the history of Western philosophy. Indeed, it would be true to say that many of the key features of modernity are derived from a synthesis first expressed by Kant at the end of the Enlightenment. The extent to which religion has profited or lost in the light of Kant's thought, is an open question, with thinkers on both sides arguing the case. Was Kant the "founding father of symbolic theology" as Phillip Rossi suggests?[9] Or did he hammer the last nail in the coffin of religion and replace God with the Categorical Imperative? This is the issue facing interpretations of Kant and a lot hangs on it. If we can answer yes to the first question, then theological constructivism, i.e., the conscious effort to build theological truth claims, has a future.

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concerning interpretations of Kant's epistemology (debates for example over realism or non-realism), but to set the parameters of the question of religion more explicitly. Kant after all has been seen by many as the father of many modern disciplines including that of the philosophy of religion - see for example James Collins, *The Emergence of Philosophy of Religion*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1967), pp.89-212.

[8] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, in *Kant Selections* (London, Macmillan, 1988), ed. Lewis White Beck, p.325.

[9] See for example Phillip Rossi's "Kant as the Father of Symbolic Theology: Hope and the Symbols of Christian Faith" in *Philosophy Today* 25 (1981), pp.24-33, Kant is described as the father of symbolic theology whose three critiques are intended to facilitate a way of thinking about nature that sees it as purposive and meaningful. As we shall see this also parallels Stewart Sutherland's claim that the universe is such, that it makes sense to be holy.

Kant's 'Copernican Revolution' attempted to reverse the relationship between the knower (as subject) and the knower (as object), and change the priority that the objective had over the subjective. Kant's 'revolution' was to make the mind into an entity which imposed upon nature certain categories, without which it was unable to make sense of its own stimuli. Thus, Kant's 'Copernican Revolution' can be accurately described as a turn to the subject, where subjectivity is no longer thought of as a second-rate form of knowledge. After Kant, subjectivity characterises *all* knowledge. As Tracy points out, this aspect of Kant's thought leads directly to the blossoming of Romanticism and the freedom to delight in symbol.[10]

The 'Copernican Revolution' was considered to be a significant development in belief about human knowledge. Through it, Kant was believed to have demonstrated that while knowledge does initially come from empirical sense experience, it does not come without the additional processing of the categories of the mind. However, Kant's philosophy was also intended to be a *critical* philosophy, and attempted to expose the limits of reason in a way that did not induce total scepticism. It was an attack upon the confidence of metaphysical and theological dogmatics yet with the intention of enabling a new rational faith.[11] The question that theologians have been forced to deal with following

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[10] David Tracy, "Literary Theory and the Return of the Forms for Naming and Thinking God in Theology" in *Journal of Religion* 74:3 (1994), pp.302-319, p.309.

[11] Kant believed that prior to him all philosophy had been dogmatic, the need therefore was for a new approach in philosophy which was critical without being absurdly sceptical.

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Kant is, what kind of truth does theology stand for in this new rational faith? Kant refused to accord any credibility to the idea of a speculative metaphysics. Any attempt to describe in definitive terms the nature of a *meta*-physical reality would, in his opinion, fail. Theology, as speculative metaphysics was likewise instantly invalidated by Kant. Consequently, the only thing that saved theology from being a pointless exercise according to Kant's schema was connected to the operations of the *practical reason* which exhibit a *moral consciousness*.

Kant's epistemology holds that we cannot look at anything without assuming it to have a purpose or end. We possess a capacity for *teleological judgement*, and theology deals with, and is derived from, this capacity. Theology is related to the question "What can I hope will be?". In Kant, therefore, there is a sense in which religion is clearly thought to be *subordinate* to ethics,

> "So far as morality is based upon the conception of man as a free agent.... it stands in need neither of the idea of another Being over him, for him to apprehend his duty, nor of an incentive other than the law itself, for him to do his duty."[12]

But this thought is quickly followed by another. Even though for its own sake morality is not dependent upon religious ideas of what constitutes the *end* towards which moral actions strive, nevertheless,

> "it is quite possible that it is necessarily related to such an end, taken not as the ground but as the sum of inevitable consequences of maxims adopted as

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[12] Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (New York, Harper & Row, 1960). Tr. Theodore M. Green and Hoyt H. Hudson, p.3.

conformable to that end".[13]

For Kant, therefore, though in one sense religion is subordinate to ethics, at the same time, "morality thus leads ineluctably to religion".[14] It is the intriguing marriage of these two thoughts that have occupied generations of thinkers attempting to establish exactly what kind of truth claim Kant held a theological truth claim to be! One influential school has forged a complete identification of God with Kant's categorical imperative, and reduced religion to ethics. Nevertheless, as we shall see in a moment, there are strong grounds to suggest that this understanding of Kant, that God is Duty writ large, will not suffice. The ordinary reading of Kant can offer a means of justifying the distinctiveness of the religious over the ethical, in terms of a hierarchical structuring of the *noumenal* and the *phenomenal*. This of course allows us to claim that theological truth claims are transcendental truth claims that function as regulative principles, disclosing the necessary conditions for future possibilities. However, we need to be careful of using the language of regulative principles too concretely. Theological truth claims function like regulative principles in that they represent a *possible* reality. A strictly Kantian understanding of a regulative principle leaves us with the problem of ensuring that the *noumenal* does not exercise privilege over the *phenomenal*, resulting in the kind of understanding of ethics that divorces thought and action. This, is in fact, according to Joanna Hodge

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[13] Ibid., p.4.

[14] Ibid., p.5.

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exactly what happens under Kant's epistemological structure,

> "Kant privileges the transcendental over the empirical and thus detaches moral reflection from the actual contexts in which human beings seek to make decisions about what to do next."[15]

A more fruitful Kantian insight concerns the way that the *Third Critique* succeeds in establishing the viability of theological truth claims as teleological judgements.[16] Adina Davidovich has explored the importance of Kant's *Third Critique* and we will examine it next.

2. On Davidovich's Re-reading of Kant

Inspired by a similar understanding of Kant she finds in Rudolph Otto and Paul Tillich, Adina Davidovich thinks that the normal understanding of Kant's views on religion places too much emphasis on *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*. This work expresses Kant's fears that fanaticism could become embodied in historical religion, but it does not develop the main idea found in the *Third Critique* that, contemplative thought about the moral designer of the universe establishes the *unity* of reason in a marriage of theory and *praxis*.[17] According to Davidovich, it is this last idea about religion that should govern our

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[15] Joanna Hodge, "Genealogy for a Postmodern Ethics; reflections on Hegel and Heidegger",in *Shadows of Spirit: Postmodernism and Religion* (London, Routledge, 1992), ed. Phillipa Berry and Andrew Wernick, p.137.

[16] See Kant's *Critique of Judgement* in *Kant Selections,* Lewis White Beck, pp.341-410.

[17] Davidovich, *Religion as a Province of Meaning*, p.xv.

understanding of Kant's final position, and not the idea found in *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* whereby religion is more or less subsumed by morality in being limited in its validity to the practical sphere.

> "Kant considered religion an <u>essential</u> bridge between the worlds of theory and praxis and elevated its status as such to that of a necessary principle through which alone the unity of reason is established"[18]   (emphasis mine)

Phillip Rossi agrees with Davidovich's fundamental point that Kant's concern was with the unity of reason, and the role that contemplative thought of a moral designer could have in its maintenance. Although he nevertheless takes issue with Davidovich over whether *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* is merely intended to be a response to fanaticism as Davidovich claims,[19] Rossi nevertheless agrees that Kant considered religion (defined as contemplative belief in God as moral architect), a necessary principle through which both the theoretical and practical dimensions of reason could be harmonised. Davidovich argues that the self-declared culmination of Kant's critical philosophy, the *Third Critique*, is meant to make us realise the necessity of a contemplative thought of a moral designer of the universe in achieving the unity of reason,

> "[Kant's] central argument that reflective judgement bridges the gap between nature and freedom led [him] to a contemplative conception of religion that differs significantly from the conception of religion of the first two critiques."[20]

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[18] Ibid., p.xv. Note, central to Davidovich's argument is the claim that Kant's most constructive engagement with the question of religion came not in *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, but in the *Critique of Judgement.*

[19] See Phillip Rossi, Book Review of *Religion as a Province of Meaning* in *Theological Studies* 55 (1994), pp.551-553.

[20] Davidovich, *Religion as a Province of Meaning,* pp.xi-xii.

Thus, the new rational faith which Kant sought, could be deemed valid beyond the practical sphere of the postulates of reason. According to Davidovich the necessity of belief in the realisation of the *summum bonum* for Kant depends in turn on a *reflective judgement* where contemplative ideas make the unity of reason a possibility.[21]

The contemplative hope that the universe has a *purpose*, is then the basis of the unity of reason. Davidovich argues that the principle of purposiveness that Kant develops, is intended to show how understanding and reason can stand together without either reducing one to the other. This idea is further linked to the *summum bonum* which involves the notion of a moral designer, not in order to *prove the existence* of such a being, but as a "possible principle of creation".

It is at this point in her argument, that Davidovich identifies Kant's *summum bonum* with a contemplative idea, and admits that she might be moving slightly beyond Kant's express wishes.

> "We must deduce from these considerations something Kant himself never explicitly claimed.. the Highest Good of the Third Critique functions as the principle of the transcendental unity of Reason and Understanding, as the unifying principle of the domains of nature and freedom."[22]

She suggests that Kant laid the ground for this conclusion but did not seem to

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[21] Ibid., p.309.

[22] Ibid., p.131.

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make it himself. Eventually, however, it became the central building blocks of the theological work of Otto and Tillich.

A detailed examination of Davidovich's reading of Kant cannot be undertaken here. My purpose in this Chapter is merely to suggest possible ways that religion may survive being reduced to ethics. Nevertheless, it is necessary to point out that there is considerable disagreement amongst Kant scholars that Davidovich could be correct. Central to Davidovich's argument is the belief that for Kant, the unity of reason is *not* achieved through the exercise of the Practical Reason.[23] This suggestion, held by Edward Caird, Yirmiaha Yovel and Richard Kroner, leads to the belief that it is in moral *action* that the human agent knows him or herself as a free noumenal being.[24] But for Davidovich, the *limitations* of the Practical Reason in knowing what the *end* of moral action is, makes this belief impossible. Thus,

> "Our conscience, informed by the Categorical Imperative, is a judge that can only condemn but never justify. It is impossible therefore for Practical Reason to find the meaning of human existence in the moral act and its place in moral history."[25]

Furthermore,

> "This can only be achieved by a Reflective Judgement by which the aspirations

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[23] Ibid., p.132.

[24] See for example, Edward Caird *The Critical Philosophy of Emmanuel Kant* 2 vols.; (New York, Kraus, 1968); Yirmiaha Yovel *Kant and the Philosophy of History* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980); and Richard Kroner *Kant's Weltanschauung* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1956), tr. John E.Smith.

[25] Davidovich, *Religion as a Province of Meaning*, pp.132-3.

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of Reason are satisfied".[26]

Although all Kant would allow was a contemplative thought about an *intuitive* reason, nevertheless, Davidovich believes that,

> "it was Kant's intention to show that contemplation of the reflective ideas which are generated in the exercise of our faculty of judgement, provides the final answer to the three great questions of philosophy: What can I know? What ought I to do? and, What may I hope for?"[27]

One of the problems faced by Davidovich's reading of Kant comes to the fore in her interpretation of Kant's *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*.[28] It is in this work that Kant deals most specifically with the question that Davidovich is concerned with, and explores whether the supreme principle of morality can indeed be *religious*. The arguments in the *Groundwork* are of course complex and involve Kant's presupposition that a radical dichotomy must exist between autonomous morality and heteronomous morality. Davidovich deals with these arguments and argues that though the *Groundwork* suggests that the supreme principle of morality is found in the Categorical Imperative, this *cannot* mean that the supreme principle for determining whether maxims are

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[26] Ibid., pp.132-3.

[27] Ibid., p.134.

[28] To an extent the existence of a piece of work explicitly dedicated to the refutation of the claim Davidovich is trying to make seems to militate against her efforts. In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (published 1797) Kant refutes the possibility of something Davidovich believes to be implied in the earlier *Critique of Judgement* (published 1790). We are therefore left wondering why, if Kant's thought were actually as Davidovich suggests, he did not make his commitments more explicit at the time of writing the *Groundwork*. This confusion is further deepened in the light of the unambiguous standpoint Kant takes on religion in *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (published 1793).

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right or wrong is *purely* a matter of reason.[29] What the Categorical Imperative does, argues Davidovich, is to help the moral agent negotiate a route through which the establishment of the *summum bonum*, the final end of morality, can be achieved.[30] Consequently, it is not by virtue of the Categorical Imperative itself, that something is added to the conception of the good held by the moral agent, for the Categorical Imperative is only a formal principle. It is the *goal* of the moral command itself - the Good - which is morally motivating.[31]

How then does the goal, or end of morality, relate to Kant's views on religion and contemplative reflection according to Davidovich? Davidovich believes that in the discussion of the nature of reflective judgement found in the *Third Critique* there is strong evidence that, for Kant, contemplative belief in God allows for a new understanding of the *summum bonum*. Rather than the normal suggestion that Kant's intention in the *Third Critique* was merely to demonstrate the existence of God as the necessary postulate of practical reason, Davidovich claims that Kant's principal aim was to lead us towards the contemplation of an intuitive reason that could have created both theoretical and practical reason, that,

"the interests of Reason then lead us to contemplate the world as a divine

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[29] Davidovich, *Religion as a Province of Meaning,* p.288.

[30] Ibid., p.290.

[31] Ibid., p.290.

creation embodying a moral purpose".[32]

Nevertheless, such intentions still do not allow for the claim that we have knowledge of God. In no sense does Davidovich suggest that Kant reneges on the epistemological commitments made in the *First Critique*. Consequently, a contemplative thought about intuitive reason, is not to be thought of as a "God's-eye-point-of-view", but merely as a point of view from the perspective of reflective judgement. As such, it is a point of view which can be of real value to us in enabling us to *live* differently. This is an extremely important point and links with views held by Stewart Sutherland. As we shall see in Chapter Seven, Sutherland's suggestion that the role of theology is to articulate the possibility of a perspective *sub specie aeternitatis* has a close parallel here. Such a perspective is, for Sutherland, "regulative in nature", and is, "approached only indirectly through the light which it throws on our world", (thus clearly Kantian) but is a perspective which opens up the possibility of a *holy life*.[33]

In Part Two of her study, Davidovich's argument is further developed in a more concrete application to the question of theological truth in the work of Otto and Tillich. Otto's theory of numinous experience is, according to Davidovich, directly indebted to Kant's understanding of religion set out in the *Critique of Judgement* and expands upon ideas left latent in Kant's own writings concerning

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[32] Ibid., p.135.

[33] Stewart Sutherland, *God, Jesus and Belief* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1984), p.111.

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the cognitivity of religious experience. Similarly, Tillich's theory of religion as a "theonomous consciousness" is seen as an extension of Kant's contemplative understanding of religion and shows that, using Kant's own terminology, religious consciousness can be different to both heteronomous consciousness (i.e., consciousness regulated by things other than itself), and autonomous consciousness (i.e., consciousness regulated *only* by itself). For Tillich, religious consciousness is *theonomous*, a third alternative between autonomy and heteronomy, and as such can establish the fact that religion recognises the practical and theoretical functions of reason, yet at the same time adds to them a dimension which, "they themselves must recognise as essential".[34] The respective differences between Otto and Tillich for Davidovich, lies in the fact that one believed that religion had some kind of foundation in reason independent of morality and science, while the other believed religion was the *depth dimension* of all other aspects of culture.

In the light of Davidovich's reading of Kant, we are licensed to understand theological truth claims as forms of teleological judgement that go *beyond* the practical sphere; that they are objects of contemplative reflection, and that consequently, "religion as a province of meaning" can play "an essential role in the economy of reason".[35] It therefore appears possible, even under the Kantian

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[34] Davidovich, *Religion within the Province of Meaning*, p.228. This dimension is of course the *depth* dimension of existence that religion stands for.

[35] Ibid., p.305.

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rubric of critical transcendentalism, to escape the modernist compulsion to sacrifice theological truth claims on the altar of the fact/value dichotomy. Theological truth claims as claims about the nature of human experience can be meaningful without necessitating the reduction of the province of meaning of religion, to that of the private individual's subjective taste.

If accurate and reliable, Davidovich's re-reading of Kant's Third Critique does offer significant resources for the development of an understanding of religion and the role of theological truth claims which allows religion some kind of distinctiveness from ethics. Davidovich follows Tillich in believing that religion represents a *depth* dimension of human experience which cannot be reduced to ethics, but yet is not completely unrelated to ethics.[36]

> "Religion is not a special function of man's spiritual life, but is the dimension
> of depth in all of its functions."[37]

Tillich names that which religion represents as *ultimate concern*. Finding itself without a natural home in any of the three spiritual functions of the human life, religion accepts that it is a vagrant force whose character *is* as the ultimate concern of all aspects of living. In the moral sphere it is the "unconditional

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[36] It is interesting to note the way that both Tillich and Tracy choose more or less spatial metaphors that are in some way representative of the idea of an *eschaton* - a not-yet-but-already-lived reality. See for example Kevin Vanhoozer's review of *On Naming the Present*, in *Reviews in Religion and Theology* 1 (1997), pp.44-47. "Tracy's God is ultimately eschatological - not only the God of the future and of hope, but the other-than-worldly God who disrupts concepts and confidence."

[37] Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1959), p.5.

seriousness of the moral demand".[38] In the cognitive sphere it is the "passionate longing for ultimate reality", and in the aesthetic sphere it is the "infinite desire to express ultimate meaning".[39] Consequently, religion cannot be rejected with ultimate seriousness because ultimate seriousness is an expression of an ultimate concern. Davidovich's model of religion as a province of meaning makes much sense of this understanding of religion. Religion has generally provided a *unifying* perspective that has married the diverse and sometimes conflicting interests found within different cultures, but it has also a perspective with an ultimate concern. It may therefore be possible to tie in here with theological programmes like Tracy's, that see religion as a paradigmatically hermeneutical phenomenon, for which an analogical imagination is an essential tool.

Nevertheless, if Davidovich's project is to succeed, care must be taken to avoid the cognitive privilege of theological truth claims. Davidovich shows recognition of this problem when she discusses whether a Kantian defence of the rationality of religion must also lead to the stronger claim that all rational agents must be religious.[40]

> "Even if we agree that proponents of the Kantian school offer an intriguing defence of the rationality of religion, we may still want to ask if they succeed in arguing for the stronger case that all human beings must be religious. The two claims tend to merge in their work. They defend religion by showing its rational necessity. Yet it may be possible to deny their stronger claim that in

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[38] Ibid., p.8.

[39] Ibid., p.8.

[40] Ibid., p.309. Davidovich herself expresses reservations about this latter claim.

order to be fully rational we must all be religious and still to accept their defence of the rationality of religion"[41]

But herein lies a problem. How can an understanding of religion that focuses on contemplative belief in, "the world as a divine creation embodying a moral purpose", do *enough* to escape cognitive privilege?

In Davidovich's essay, "Kant's Theological Constructivism", she discusses three distinct models of theological constructivism that, she claims, Kant employed.[42] The first two "ethical postulation" (found primarily in the *Critique of Practical Reason* but developed in the *Critique of Judgement* and *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*), and "imaginative projection" (found primarily in *Metaphysics of Morals*, but also in the *Third Critique*, and *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*), subjugate religion to morality. However, the third model of theological constructivism "contemplative construction", makes religion as an independent province of meaning a possibility. This model is found most explicitly in the *Third Critique* where, Davidovich claims, Kant,

> "outlines a program of theological constructivism for which faith is rooted in the subjectivity of feelings and can nevertheless, claim for its vision universal communicability."[43]

Furthermore,

> "The contemplative idea of God that this model suggests is the necessary

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[41] Davidovich, *Religion as a Province of Meaning*, p.309.

[42] See Davidovich, "Kant's Theological Constructivism", pp.323-51.

[43] Ibid., p.345.

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correlate of both moral decision and the scientific quest for truth."[44]

What Davidovich argues for, is the idea that an essential part of all quests for truth, in whatever sphere, is the contemplative idea of God. In describing the third of Kant's models of theological constructivism, Davidovich says she is following Kant's use of the word contemplative, as "a thought that is indifferent to the existence of its object", which,

> "considers the character of the object only as an object of thought, <u>regardless of its existence or in-existence.</u>"[45] (emphasis mine)

Nevertheless, there is a problem here, if a contemplative idea is as Davidovich describes, how can it function in any meaningful way as the necessary correlate of morality and science whilst being *indifferent* to the existence or otherwise of its object? What kind of province of meaning does a contemplative idea of God that is 'indifferent' to its object, represent?[46] This of course raises the spectre of the realism versus anti-realism debate which we will discuss more fully in Chapter Seven, in the context of a debate between Stewart Sutherland and Don Cupitt. In the light of our present subject under discussion it is unclear whether Davidovich would agree more with Cupitt for whom the possibility of morality is real irrespective of whether or not such a possibility *corresponds* with the way the universe actually is, or with Sutherland, for whom, the possibility of morality

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[44] Ibid., p.345.

[45] Ibid., p.345.

[46] See Davidovich, *Religion as a Province of Meaning,* p.79, where Davidovich quotes Kant in the Third Critique describing a judgement of taste as "merely contemplative"!

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is dependent upon its correspondence with the way the universe is. On the one hand Davidovich is committed to a Kantian picture which suggests that morality is a possibility because it is written into reason as a universal phenomenon, while on the other hand that which secures the unity of universal reason is a contemplative idea which is indifferent to the existence or otherwise of its object. Whether this means Davidovich is a realist or not is open to question.

A further problem that may arise is with Davidovich's understanding of a *province* of meaning. Despite Davidovich's claim that the rationality of religion does not necessarily lead to the further claim that all rational beings are religious, it may be inevitable that her understanding of the kind of province that religion represents, will come to be regarded as the sole province of meaning. As the sole province of meaning, it would necessarily have privileged access to truth. The worry that the province that religion occupies in Davidovich's account will come to be regarded as a no-man's land province, where a contemplative idea of God is incapable of functioning as a truly critical principle with which to judge between rival theological truth claims, is however, less serious than it might seem. Where Davidovich may offer a plausible way around both of these potential difficulties lies in the relationship that she might suggest exists *between* the three models of theological constructivism in Kant. In a similar way, to the way that David Tracy suggests that theology is structured into three related disciplines and correlated with three related publics, Davidovich could argue that the shortcomings of *one* of Kant's models of theological constructivism, are

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made up by the strengths of one of the others.

Caution needs to be exercised to prevent the exaltation of the religious province of meaning as the sole province of meaning. We must be reminded that religion secures for us a coherent worldview and does not therefore seek to compete for the epistemological high ground. In the same way that the distinction between religion and culture is at best only *heuristic* and allows only for the use of provisional and normative judgements, the distinction between a religious province of meaning and any other, must, at all times be kept open to revision to prevent truth becoming a privileged possession. Even religion will corrupt truth when it is allowed to become the sole province of meaning. Davidovich's defence of religion as a province of meaning, should be thought of as one necessitated by the state of the philosophy of religion in modernity. It is *not* a claim for the privilege of religion, but is an *apologetic* for its existence.

Conclusion

The conclusion to Part One of this thesis is to claim validity for the making of theological truth claims in the contemporary situation. We have seen that theological truth claims need not compete with other truth claims for the epistemological high ground, that they do not necessitate cognitive privilege over other truth claims. We have also seen that theological truth claims do not necessarily need to supersede moral imperatives, or be superseded by moral

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imperatives. In this Chapter, we have seen that religion can make a truth claim about the world, without either colliding with science or being reduced to ethics. By centralising Otto's idea that we possess a religious consciousness, Davidovich allows us to claim that the type of truth that theological truth represents concerns meaning. Thus, while being a claim about *the way the world is*, it is however not (in the first instance anyway), a claim about correspondence with the way things are, but about coherence. It is therefore possible to incorporate an idea that we will come on to discuss in Chapter Six, in the context of David Tracy's theological paradigm. If I am right in saying Davidovich moves more towards a coherence model of truth than a correspondence model, then her epistemological claims locate the province that religion represents in the human *imagination*. Her suggestions could therefore tie in neatly with David Tracy's description of the role in theology of an *analogical* imagination, and his suggestion that religion is a paradigmatically *hermeneutical* phenomenon; a sphere which facilitates a non-totalising meaningfulness, through all the flux and uncertainty of the moral, aesthetic and epistemological quests.

The problem I have tried to highlight with Davidovich is that the unity that is secured for reason through the contemplative idea of God could easily lead to religion becoming the *sole* province of meaning, if not properly regulated with some critical principle. This could lead to the problem of totalisation all over again and risk debilitating the public scope of theological truth claims. However, I have suggested that Davidovich might employ the other two of Kant's models

of theological constructivism to alleviate this potential difficulty. What is evident is that Davidovich offers considerable opportunity to further the work of revisionist theologians in striving to justify the publicness of theological truth claims premised upon notions of human experience.

Tracy can take great comfort from projects like Davidovich's in his war of attrition against Lindbeck's charge that the notion of experience at the heart of his theology is "logically and empirically vacuous".[47] For Davidovich, the distinctively theological dimension that a theological truth claim represents that is more than that offered by morality, has to do with the provision of the possible conditions of meaningfulness. Thus, theological truths claim can be pregnant with possibility in Davidovich's schema. In Part Two of this thesis we will examine what it is about a theological truth claim that can induce the *birth* of such possibility? In Chapters Five to Seven we will approach this question head-on, for the answer that Tracy's revisionist theology offers, following Ricoeur, is that it is art that is the midwife of possibility. Whether she is as proficient as she needs to be will be the key question that will emerge by the end of Chapter Six. Nevertheless, for the meantime my conclusion to Part One of the thesis is to validate the making of theological truth. Theological truth claims are meaningful, and need not be paralysed between metaphysics and morals.

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[47] George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age,* (Philadelphia, Westminster, 1984), p.32.

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PART TWO

THEOLOGY AND IMAGINED POSSIBILITY

Introduction

The argument of Part One has been to suggest that theological truth claims may survive being reduced to ethics when understood as claims about the possible conditions of meaningfulness. Nevertheless, the province of meaning that religion is concerned with is therefore not a province that is external to the human knower, but is one that is immanent within the processes of knowing. In locating the province of meaning of religion in this manner we can therefore claim legitimacy for theological truth claims. Consequently, it is the conclusion of Part One of this thesis that theological truth claims *are* valid. Following in the spirit of Kant's *Third Critique* theological truth claims are valid as claims about the imagination.

By itself, the conclusion of the First Part of the thesis does not serve to advance the making of theological truth claims very far. In Part Two of the thesis I therefore attempt an exercise in theological constructivism. The question is no longer *whether* we are justified in talking of theological truth claims, but what exactly do we *mean* when we do so. In Part Two I explore the implications of focusing upon imagined *possibility* as that which is most distinctive of a theological truth claim. In Chapter Five, after an introduction to the notion of

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possibility itself, we explore Paul Ricoeur's idea of the imagined possibility of self-authenticity. Here, I argue that Ricoeur fails to distinguish between different types of imagined possibility, and consequently invests a great deal in believing that the imagined possibility of self-authenticity is sufficient for the transformation of the human situation from self-centredness to other-centredness. With this criticism made, we move on in Chapter Six to examine an explicitly theological appropriation of Ricoeur in David Tracy. Here I argue that Tracy makes certain presuppositions about art that leaves his theological model unable to distinguish holiness from fanaticism. In Chapter Seven and the Conclusion to the thesis I begin to offer a constructive suggestion for a renewed understanding of the imagined possibilities that theology might offer. In Chapter Seven I draw from Stewart Sutherland the idea that theological truth claims represent the possibility of a life of *holiness* lived *sub specie aeternitatis*, and suggest that the type of imagined possibility that theological truth claims represent is better thought of as the imagined possibility of *goodness*, rather than the imagined possibility of self-authenticity. In the Conclusion, I follow Iris Murdoch, in defending the primacy of the concept of the Good, over other concepts. Here, I argue that the concept of goodness is not vulnerable to the vicissitudes of art, in the same way that other concepts are.

CHAPTER FIVE

ON THEOLOGICAL TRUTH, LANGUAGE & POSSIBILITY

"It is from language as a medium that our whole experience of the world, and especially hermeneutical experience, unfolds."   Hans-Georg Gadamer[1]

"In imagining his possibilities man acts as a prophet of his own existence... By changing his imagination man alters his existence."   Paul Ricoeur[2]

Introduction

In Chapter Three, I argued for the primacy of *praxis* understandings of faith and *phronesis* understandings of reason. Chapter Five advances the argument of Chapter Three by exploring the role that language plays in the acquisition of *phronetic* sense-making skills. Following Ricoeur, I argue that theological language succeeds where ordinary language fails in opening up previously unattainable possibilities, and that theological truth claims are indeed claims about imagined possibilities. Against Ricoeur, I argue that the imagined possibility of self-authenticity is not sufficient for the transformation of the human condition from self-centredness to other-centredness. In this Chapter, I

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[1] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (New York, Crossroad, 1989), 2nd Revised Edition, tr. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, p.457.

[2] Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth* (Evanston, Northwest University Press, 1965), p.127.

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begin by exploring how the notion of possibility itself might relate to a theological truth claim. We start by exploring and defending the distinction between a possibility-in-principle and a possibility-in-fact. Next, we describe the pitfalls involved in the notion of possibility when linked too closely with Heideggerian ideas of being, and follow a theological appropriation of this link in deconstructionism. We then examine more of the promise that the notion of possibility holds out for theologians in the connection Ricoeur makes between possibility and language. Here, we show what Ricoeur believes he has done to advance on Bultmann's failure to distinguish between a possibility-in-principle and a possibility-in-fact. Following Bultmann and Ricoeur, I conclude that theological language does differ from ordinary language in that it opens the door to possibility, and thereby makes possible the acquisition of *phronesis*. Nevertheless, I argue that Ricoeur's construal of the *goal* of possibility as authentic subjectivity and its realisation through the creative imagination, fails to distinguish adequately enough between imagined possibilities that are conducive to the transformation of the human situation and those that are not.[3]

1. On Possibility

The notion of possibility has long been of interest to philosophers and theologians. Book IX of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* provides the seminal

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[3] Kevin Vanhoozer raises this question of Ricoeur in Chapter 6 of *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, and asks, "Can Ricoeur's attention to narrative... save him from reducing salvation to an event not of history, but of human subjectivity..?". See, p.136.

philosophical account of the idea. In the *Metaphysics* Aristotle contrasts possibility with actuality but insists on the temporal, logical and ontological priority of actuality.[4]

> "For from the potential the actual is always produced by an actual thing ...
> there is always some first mover and the mover already exists actually".[5]

The belief that the distinctiveness of a *theological* truth claim lies in the notion of possibility offers significant resources for the project of a revisable theological truth claim. It is my claim that faith - that which was argued in Chapters Two and Three to facilitate the transformation of the human situation through the positing of an ultimate goal - is a unique vehicle of possibility. At the outset, therefore, there is an intimate link between theological truth claims, through which faith finds expression, and possibility. The clearest statement of this link is of course Bultmann's *New Testament and Mythology* where "demythologisation" is a process which interprets religious mythology in the light of the radical contingency of human existence.[6] The 'new life' or 'salvation' that religion offers represents the possibility of a state of transformed and authentic being. To understand theological truth claims as expressions of such possibilities, is then, to represent something which has long been specific

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[4] Pointed out by Kevin Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.33 n.8.

[5] Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Book IX (Berlin, 1831), tr. Immanuel Becker 1049b, pp.24-26.

[6] See Rudolph Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology" (1941), *New Testament and Mythology and other basic writings,* (London, SCM Press Ltd, 1985), tr. Schubert M. Ogden, pp.1-43.

to religion. However, the key question is to what extent the theological appropriation of the notion of possibility, can itself facilitate a meaningful and constructive way of moving from possibilities-*in-principle*, to possibilities-*in-fact*. As all readers of Rudolph Bultmann know, this problem has a well-worn history and, as we shall see at the end of this Chapter, appears to be circumvented only through the creation of another problematic.[7] Ricoeur has, of course, offered one route out of the impasse Bultmann was faced with, and is, as we shall see, a route adopted by David Tracy. Ricoeur argues that it is the *creative imagination* that is the "power of the possible", and hence that which ultimately distinguishes between possibilities-in-principle and possibilities-in-fact.[8] In offering this solution, however, Ricoeur leaves us facing the question of how to distinguish between a *real* imagined possibility and a *false* imagined possibility.

Some might argue that this is a false distinction and ought to be rejected. They would suggest that all imagined possibilities have equal status and that consequently a means of judging *between* imagined possibilities is unnecessary.

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[7] As already mentioned in the Introduction, for Bultmann possibility was the *key* distinguishing feature between philosophy and theology. "Philosophy thus takes a possibility in principle to be already a possibility in fact. But in the opinion of the New Testament, human beings generally have lost the possibility in fact; indeed, their knowledge of their authenticity is falsified by being tied up with the opinion that they have control over it." See Rudolph Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology" (1941) in *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, tr. & ed. Schubert M. Ogden, p.27.

[8] See Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Evanston, Northwest University Press, 1974), ed. Don Ihde, p.408.

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How then can we justify the distinction between real imagined possibilities (i.e., possibilities-in-fact), and false imagined possibilities (i.e., possibilities-in-principle)? An example of a false imagined possibility could be taken as the possibility of a unicorn existing. Unicorn existence is a possibility-in-principle, but it is not a possibility-in-fact. This is a harder claim to justify than appears the case at first. The temptation is therefore to dissolve the distinction between possibilities-in-principle and possibilities-in-fact, and claim that the possibility of unicorn existence in principle, must also mean the possibility of unicorn existence *in fact*. As Bultmann rightly observed, this is what philosophy that is independent of theology tends to do. It assumes that a possibility-in-principle *is* a possibility-in-fact. However to hold this assumption would seem to necessitate the belief that *all* imagined possibilities have equal status. This is clearly unsatisfactory. Are we to believe that the possibility of unicorns, elves, fairies and dragons, is of the same order as the possibility of goodness? In my analysis of possibility, a *real* imagined possibility must be distinguished from a *false* imagined possibility, and the heart of that distinction hinges upon the *difference that an imagined possibility can make in the transformation of the human situation*. Unicorns, fairies and elves undoubtedly enhance the human situation. Who among us has not benefited from recreational, imaginative flights of fantasy? Nonetheless, imagined possibilities such as these do not have the same power as the imagined possibility of goodness. As we shall see in Chapter Seven and the Conclusion, the imagined possibility of goodness possesses something that other imagined possibilities do not. Consequently, it is the case that the

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imagined possibility of goodness has the capacity to be genuinely transformative of the human condition. The distinction between possibilities-in-principle and possibilities-in-fact therefore has to be maintained, and the heart of the distinction has to be between possibilities that can be seen to contibute directly to the transformation of the human situation and those that cannot. It is the argument of Part Two of this thesis that an understanding of theological truth as the articulation of possibility does indeed offer us significant promise, but that the confidence that Ricoeur and Tracy have in the creative imagination as the "power of the possible", is misplaced unless effort is made to adequately distinguish between different types of imagined possibility.[9]

a: The Pitfalls of Possibility

The idea that possibility is at the heart of the human quest has its modern roots in Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Kant. As we have seen in Chapter Four, Kant's most significant contribution to theology lies in his endorsement of the power of human creativity and the idea that theological truths are symbolic truths. Heidegger's contribution, is however concerned with the link between possibility, being and human temporality.[10] The idea that theological truth is about being, naturally places questions of legitimation in an altogether different context. Being is not a category that the epistemological resources of modernity

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[9] See Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde, p.408.

[10] See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1962) Tr. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson.

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can cope with very easily for it does not render itself as an item of knowledge in the manner preferred by modernity. Nevertheless, although being, as a philosophical category, may challenge and stimulate modern epistemological paradigms of legitimation, we are nonetheless still charged with the responsibility of judging between alternative accounts of being, and are therefore forced back into the arena of public theological truth and the question of revisability. What *is* an adequate account of being? A created, imagined account? Or something more? The idea that theological truth claims are accounts of *possible* ways of being, places us under an even greater responsibility to ensure that the conversation does not drift off into some vaporous 'fog' of obscurity. To do so would negate any attempt at legitimation, and would yield no discernible critical principle. As I argued in Chapter One, theology has to leave the ghetto it has been placed in and stand by its commitment to the idea that it makes publicly accessible truth claims. Too much talk of the *wrong* sort of possibility, may in the end militate against this commitment, and lead us into a new ghetto of our own making.

b: Possibility in the Fabric Of Finitude?

Any discussion of the theological appropriation of possibility must take account of Heidegger. Heidegger turned Aristotle's account of possibility on its head, arguing that instead of actuality having precedence over possibility, possibility was indeed the distinguishing aspect of actuality. It is therefore with Heidegger that we must begin. Heidegger's contribution to the question of possibility

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concerns the distinction between authentic and inauthentic ways of being.[11] For

Heidegger, authentic existence is a way of living *face to face* with human

finitude and temporality. He does not balk at the prospect of ultimate mortality,

but finds possibility in the very fabric of finitude. Heidegger thinks humans are

faced with two choices. One of accepting the flux of human finitude without

seizing hold of possibility, and simply living life 'da', there but without being.

The other, to create possibilities out of the flux, and thereby realise being 'sein'.

To accomplish the marriage of 'da', that which is, and 'sein', that which might

be, is then the human challenge. To live 'dasein' is to make real the promise of

possibility in the fabric of finitude. However, the problem with Heidegger

situating possibility in an analysis of being, concerns the move *beyond* all

epistemology. In the manner that contemporary postmodern interpretations of

Heidegger have alighted upon the critique of presence and logocentricity, we

witness a move beyond all talk of truth, and enter a realm where endless

negations seem to be the only stable factor in a constantly shifting world of

symbol.

Deconstruction is, in a large measure, a response to the problems initiated by

Heidegger but interprets them in the light of Saussurian linguistics.[12] Derrida

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[11] Useful readers on Heidegger include Stephen Mulhall, *Heidegger and Being and Time* (London, Routledge, 1996); H. Dreyfuss, *Being-In-The-World* (Cambridge, Mass; MIT Press, 1991); George Steiner, *Heidegger* (London, Fontana, 1978).

[12] De Saussure saw language as a self-enclosed, self-referential system of signs, no longer dependent upon some transcendent signifier. For De Saussure, language is composed of symbols, a complex inter-network of factors "beyond" the words we use. But for him, a symbol has no

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is of course the grand-master of deconstruction, and argues that it is the differences *between* symbols that symbols represent not what they refer *to*. Language is not referential but deferential. Words defer meaning endlessly. For Derrida, the referential idea of language is too closely tied to an idea of being as a stable presence (ontotheology). Derrida's reading of Heidegger makes him believe that such a notion cannot approximate to authentic existence, and consequently strategies need to be devised to overcome the perennial temptation of humankind to objectify being.

Nowhere more, is such objectification exemplified for Derrida, than in metaphysics. Metaphysics, for Derrida, is under the wrong impression that what it refers to is somehow more than rhetorical. That is, that it deals with more than just the imaginary and abstract constructs of literature. Derrida thus wants to undo the privilege of metaphysics. Metaphysics does not, and cannot, acknowledge its own rhetorical nature. The great strength of literature, and the reason why writing is therefore privileged over speech in Derrida, is that texts by their very nature do acknowledge their own rhetorical character. For Derrida, texts constantly expose the contradictions inherent in themselves. Thus, Christopher Norris can correctly describe Derrida's concept of writing as,

> ".. the free-play within every system of communication (whose) operations are

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meaning outside its position in the network. A symbol is dependent upon its position in relation to other symbols for meaning. A symbol gains its meaning however, not by virtue of any similarities between the other symbols, but by virtue of the *differences between it and others*. See, Ferdinand de Saussure, *Courses in General Linguistics* (London, Peter Owen, 1960), tr. Wade Baskin.

precisely those which escape the self-consciousness of speech and its deluded sense of the mastery of concept over language."[13]

Derrida's analysis of language does not, therefore, permit us to make the kind of moves that we shall shortly see Ricoeur making. Literature does not give birth to a language which can transcend the contradictions that it generates. Derrida's logic will not rest content with a 'poetics', as if the logical contradictions inherent in language can be transcended by some form of rhetorical language. (This idea is implicit in Ricoeur's belief that the truths of literature are accessed in an indirect way, that literature and its world of narrative and metaphor indirectly reflect a world of meaning). For Derrida, such an approach is merely another example of the privilege of metaphysics, and the desire to relegate writing to a secondary place after speech.

Kevin Hart has been keen to take Derrida's reading of Heidegger and employ it in theology.[14] According to Hart, both deconstruction and theology have at the centre of their concerns the world of signs. Indeed Hart claims, theology is a discourse which creates the distinction between sign and signified.[15] Theology also, according to Hart, has made use of the notion of a fall in relation

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[13] Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction Theory and Practice* (London, Methuen, 1982), p.28.

[14] See Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989).

[15] Hart argues along the lines of the fact that God has always taken to be more than the sum total of discourse about him.

to language. This notion Hart finds explicitly in Derrida, where, contrary to the understanding Western thought has generally held to, Derrida employs the notion of a fall *within* the sign. Signs are themselves a sign of the fall. What Hart finds encouraging in Derrida, is his preparedness to fully exploit the reality of the sign, and on that basis suggests deconstruction to be a potential ally in the quest for a non-metaphysical theology. Far from being an attack upon theology, deconstruction is an answer to the theological demand for a non-metaphysical theology. Together, both deconstruction and theology recognise that the sign is the originator of metaphysics, and consequently both seek to put it into question.[16]

According to Hart, the real centre of Derrida's concern lies in his belief that ontotheology - the belief in being as a stable presence - is a manipulation, thus any attempt to halt the free-play of meaning by either a concept or an action which grounds any text with a determinate centre is to comply with ontotheology, and to privilege metaphysics above literature, speech above writing, book above text, the spiritual above the material. There are therefore only two clearly defined ways to frame the question of meaning, the ontological theory of signification, and the grammatological theory of signification. The first postulates the existence of a transcendent signified which all signification is grounded in, and where signs are fallen from pure presence to representation (re-

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[16] Kevin Hart, *Trespass of the Sign*, p.21.

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presence).[17] The second way (Derrida's), refuses to acknowledge the downward fall of the sign, and argues that the sign conveys meaning not through a fall from full presence, but through the random interaction of other signs. The consequences of Derrida's theory of signs are most evident as a critique of any theology presupposing the idea that God is the transcendent signified, a sign which is entirely independent of language, and self-fulfilling. It is also evidently a critique of any theory of interpretation which assumes that the concept of a self-fulfilling sign as an ultimate ground of meaning, is necessary for interpretation. But furthermore, it is a critique of any practice which functions on such an assumption. Hart argues that deconstruction has close ties to various mystical traditions. These are similar to deconstructionism in that they too display a critical antipathy to philosophy, on the grounds that it is naively metaphysical. Negative theology is such a tradition and Hart distinguishes between metaphysical theologies (which include Western philosophy) and non-metaphysical theologies, and argues that the Christian tradition of negative theology is a form of non-metaphysical theology.

At the end of *The Trespass of the Sign*, Hart urges us to once again read the Christian mystics with the approval of Heidegger as a possible revived negative theology.[18] But can metaphysics be eschewed quite so lightly? As an attempt

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[17] See G R. Evans, *Philosophy and Theology in the Middle Ages* (London, Routledge, 1993), for a good account of the origins of this view.

[18] Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, pp.237-269.

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to define the apophatic moment that is present in all theology, Hart's observations have some use, but is theology an entirely apophatic venture?[19] As Peter Hodgson rightly suggests,

> "an apophatic moment is necessary in theology since negation is a necessary element of the divine life, but it should not control the logic of theological discourse."[20]

Furthermore, others might well argue that the extreme existential trajectory that Heidegger sets off on, is of little use when it comes to *identifying* the difference between authentic being and inauthentic being.[21] Consequently, the flaw that is at the heart of the Heidegger-Derrida-Hart trajectory is the absence of an awareness of the need for *public criteria*. Deconstruction is not without a concern for truth, however, that concern is governed by a commitment to an *inverted* metaphysics which ultimately gives us no hope of distinguishing between an edifying paradox and a destructive and false contradiction. The Zen Koan demonstrates the problem precisely. An alternative trajectory from Heidegger, which we witness in revisionist approaches must therefore avoid this problem by being committed to the old metaphysics of presence and consequently to the need for public criteria. Although the problem revisionists face concerns the development of *criteria* of publicness, they at least are clear

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[19] Apophaticism refers to the stream in Christian spirituality that suggests that God/reality is encountered through the negation of all images.

[20] Peter Hodgson, *Winds of the Spirit* (London, SCM Press Ltd., 1994), p.357 n4.

[21] See Ricoeur's critique of what he describes as Heidegger's "short route". Paul Ricoeur, "Existence and Hermeneutics", *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde, pp.3-24.

that theology has to make publicly adjudicated truth claims. The deconstructive theologians abrogation of theology to the sphere of personal mysticism will not suffice. Evidently a more constructive route for theology must be advanced. As Simone Weil says, "the need of truth is more sacred than any other need."[22]

In this section I have so far concentrated on the pitfalls of understanding the relationship between possibility and being. If the deconstructionist reading of Heidegger's link between possibility and being fails the criteria for a theological truth claim that we have so far described, what then is an alternative reading of possibility? Wherein lies the promise of possibility? In the next section we will answer this question by looking at Paul Ricoeur's link between possibility and creative language.

2. On Language and the Promise of Possibility

In recent times, Brueghel's painting *The Tower of Babel* has been widely used to illustrate the problem of language. In the painting itself, Brueghel depicts a massive tower rising out of a flat plain, dwarfing the medieval town that lies at its feet and casting a shadow that extends far into the countryside. The detail in the painting is part of its allure, with tiny construction workers beavering around the walls of the tower, bolstering the buttresses and hoisting masonry further up to the workers at the top. At the very top of the structure, obscured by cloud, we

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[22] Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind* (New York, G P. Putnam, 1952). Tr. Arthur Willis, p.35.

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can see human specks perched precariously on top of scaffolding, wrestling with huge blocks and pushing the tower, stone by stone, ever heavenwards. At first glance the painting is a symbol of human achievement and progress. The harbour, filled with boats bringing materials for this vast stone project, speaks of industry and organisation. However, when looked at closely the painting seems more like a symbol of human *pride* than achievement. The tower is shown clinging precariously to the rock that is its foundation, and what looks like the lower buttresses are shown requiring urgent repair. In the foreground of the painting the encounter between the King and his cowering masons adds tension to the scene, suggesting that all is far from well.

Brueghel's Tower of Babel is of course based on the story found in the Old Testament (Genesis 11). In it, a people of one language, living in one place, build a city, and a tower to reach up to the sky. But the LORD, comes down to mock their tower, for he sees in it a threat to his own sovereignty.

> "Behold they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only
> the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will
> now be impossible to them." (Gen 11:7 *RSV*)

In revenge, the LORD confuses their language, "so that they may not understand one another's speech", and scatters them abroad over the face of the earth. The story concludes with the statement that the place that commemorates this event is hitherto to be called Babel, "because there the LORD confused the language of the earth." (Genesis 11:9)

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The question the painting poses, as all art forms do, is the question of interpretation. How should we 'read' Breughel's text? Painted in the Sixteenth Century somewhere in Italy, it is itself an interpretation of another much earlier text about human desire.[23] To understand the latter text therefore involves an understanding of the former one. So where do we find the *true* meaning of the painting? Does it lie in the accuracy with which Breughel has matched his intentions with the original author's intentions? Or is the true meaning that which fits the needs of the current interpreter? Can we follow our sceptical modern sensibilities and ignore the presence of a deity in the earlier biblical text, and simply ask whether the true meaning of Breughel's *Tower of Babel* is a moral lesson about greed, or an icon of prosperity? Or, must we inevitably judge Breughel's faithfulness to the original text, in the light of it being a story about the relationship between humanity and God? Or do we simply give up on both truth and meaning, and confess that art pushes us outside them both? Such then is the problem of interpretation, and of language.

At one level, the story of the Tower of Babel is of course a mythological story designed originally to explain a place name, Babel. Negatively, it has become an enduring symbol of the *incommensurability* of language, the idea that real communication between the different symbol systems that humans exist within,

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[23] Art historians differ over the precise dating of *The Tower of Babel*. The original is known to be the work of Pieter Breughel the Elder (1525/30-1569). The fact that Breughel's son continued copying and interpreting his father's work is reason enough to suggest that the paintings of the Breughels are a good example of the hermeneutical phenomenon.

is an illusion. As already touched upon, this idea is not without appeal for the question of interpretive practice. With it we can simply allow that the theist and the atheist actually *do* live in different worlds of language, and that the need for conversation or dialogue between them can be surpassed by the need for tolerance of the other's (literally) incomprehensible position. But to accept such an approach is to abandon any model of theology which includes the drive towards publicness as part of the adjudication of its truth claims. There must therefore be another way through the problem of interpretation, a way which accepts *both* the conditioning that interpretation effects upon truth claims *and* the substantive reality that truth claims represent. More positively therefore, the image of a babel of tongues can conjure up the idea that language creates previously unknown possibilities. For many, including pre-eminently Tracy amongst revisionist theologians, this way is to be found in the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur takes seriously the possibilities that language offers us beyond the empty rhetoric of the deconstructionists, and acknowledges that the human quest involves the desire to move, "beyond the desert of criticism."[24]

a: The Promise of Possibility in Paul Ricoeur

For Ricoeur, possibility is intimately connected with language. Like Heidegger, Ricoeur thinks that human existence must be more than simply 'das', what there is. To exist at all for Ricoeur is to have an excess of being, which makes *what*

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[24] Paul Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1969), p.349

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might be, as real if not more real, than what *is*. Thus, to be human at all is to have possibilities; it is to have future possibilities that are in every way as concrete as present actualities. To be human is to have a forward-orientation. It is this understanding of the nature of human existence that forges the connection between possibility and language in Ricoeur, because it is in the creative flights of the imagination as they are expressed in metaphor and narrative, that possibility becomes real. For Ricoeur, authentic existence is therefore *mediated* through human linguistic creativity, and most importantly, through metaphor and narrative. Consequently, the creative imagination makes future possibilities *present* actualities. Taking up the opportunity Kant has afforded us in understanding symbol as a constructive power, Ricoeur has shown how symbol functions in preceding and gives rise to thought, and how symbolic language therefore contributes to the actualization of possibility.[25] In *The Rule of Metaphor*, he argues for the cognitive value of metaphor, against the idea that metaphor is a mere trope, or figure of speech.[26] For Ricoeur, metaphor is not reducible to a univocal understanding of language (see Appendix A:), where there is a one-to-one correspondence between sense and reference, but conveys meaning through an encounter *between* frameworks. This encounter reveals a

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[25] Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil,* p.348, in which Ricoeur identifies the first stage of a hermeneutical *arc* in the context of a phenomenological study of the symbolism of evil in Hebrew and Greek culture, and suggested that in understanding religion at all, the first thing we encounter is the symbol. Any philosophical unpacking of religion has therefore to be fundamentally open to the demands of the nature of symbol. Even before we meet myth, we meet symbol.

[26] See Paul Ricoeur, *Rule of Metaphor* (London, Routledge Kegan & Paul, 1978), p.5. See also the work of I.A Richards and Max Black on the cognitive value of metaphor.

similarity-in-difference between sense and reference, which gives us a semantic shock and allows for the redescription of reality. Metaphors thus retain a cognitive dimension, and a powerful link with possibility. Consequently, narrative expressions of the creative imagination are for Ricoeur,

> "the form of creative language par excellence which deals with human time and the historicity of the human condition",[27]

Narrative expressions are "the substance of things hoped for", and as such represent the "long route" to authenticity that distinguishes Ricoeur from Heidegger.[28] It is furthermore, Ricoeur's theory of narrative interpretation that makes a bridge possible between Heidegger's extreme existentialism and epistemology, between being itself and accounts of being.[29] Kevin Vanhoozer shows that for Heidegger, to be resolute in the face of death is the most authentic form of possibility. But this is a view which limits authentic existence to a "quasi-Stoical resignation". He argues that for Ricoeur, death is only "an interruption of our ability-to-be rather than its most authentic possibility".[30] Narrative is therefore intimately connected to possibility for Ricoeur, because narrative is the pre-eminent expression of human existence conditioned as it is

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[27] Kevin Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology*, p.29.

[28] George Steiner points out that Heidegger himself was possibly aware of the fact that his understanding of temporality and possibility lacked a sufficiently critical method of analysis, cf., George Steiner, *Heidegger* (London, Fontana, 1978), p.78.

[29] Kevin Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative,* p.30, for more on the "narrative hope" that distinguishes Ricoeur from Heidegger.

[30] See Paul Ricouer, *Time and Narrative* 3 Vols. (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984-88), p.65; Kevin Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, p.30.

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by *time.*[31]

The hope expressed in narrative in Ricoeur's work, is clearly an avenue of optimism in contrast to the radical negativism of deconstruction, and advances on the understanding of the hermeneutical task in Gadamer.[32] Again following insights derived from Heidegger, Gadamer's monumental *Truth and Method* is a sustained analysis of the question of understanding, and spells out in more detail the idea that to prevent truth from being subverted by method understanding needs to be likened to the kind of participation found in the interpretation of a text or work of art.[33] To an extent Ricoeur agrees that all understanding has a hermeneutical shape, and is in agreement with Gadamer that,

> "In contrast to the tradition of the cogito and to the pretension of the subject to know itself by immediate intuition, it must be said that we understand ourselves only by the long detour of the signs of humanity deposited in cultural works"[34]

Nevertheless, Ricoeur advances the work of Gadamer, in showing how explanation might *add* anything to understanding. For Ricoeur, a hermeneutical arc governs all knowledge and involves a move from understanding to

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[31] As Vanhoozer say, "narrative may well be viewed as the culmination of Ricoeur's intellectual journey. .. (it is) the place where three of Ricoeur's central themes converge, namely, possibility, temporality and creative imagination." See Kevin Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative,* p.86.

[32] For Gadamer's use of Heidegger see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp.254-264.

[33] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.101.

[34] Paul Ricoeur *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981), p.143.

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explanation and finally to a post-critical second naiveté. Ricoeur's work can therefore accept the strengths of structuralism as part of the hermeneutical arc, but develop beyond its weaknesses, moving from sense to reference. For Ricoeur, structure itself is an oriented activity that is only completed in the reader. To believe that the meaning of a text resides in its structure is all very well, so long as it is remembered that the structure of a text does not come about independent of our creativity. Because of this, Ricoeur holds that any adequate philosophy of language must do justice to the intentionality of the texts. He wants interpretation to include the fact that texts are invested with the hope of meaning. Texts do refer, in the sense that they *intend* to speak of reality.

It is evident that Ricoeurian hermeneutics offers real promise by understanding the link between language and possibility. Modernity's dominant paradigm for language has been positivist, stressing the univocal reference of language to reality and tended to interpret metaphor and narrative as disposable *vehicles* with no cognitive value. However this understanding of language is contested by Ricoeur. Metaphor and narrative have cognitive value and therefore make future possibilities become present possibilities. In Ricoeur we can find a methodological basis upon which to describe the possibility that the symbols of human culture, expressed in religious texts and religious language hold out to us. Following Ricoeur, we can consequently resolve many of the differences between different religions and cultures simply by adopting a fuller understanding of the pervasiveness of metaphorical language and narrative. The

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figures of Christ, Krishna and Confucius can be draped with metaphorical imagery without risk of contradiction, or the necessity of univocal justification. The 'after-life' can be spoken of without risk of ridicule, and the 'soul' can at last have substance without corporeal evidence. Nevertheless, attractive as these possibilities appear, we are left with a problem with Ricoeur. How are we to judge *between* metaphors? How are we to determine which metaphors create the possibility of authenticity and which do not? What is to prevent ordinary work-a-day metaphors like the "arm of the chair", from being confused with more significant metaphorical language like the "arm of the law"? Worse still, how are we to judge between rival conceptions of what constitutes a *good* metaphor? Are we to believe that we are left with absolutely *no* criteria that will justify our preference for "child of God" over "human machine" as a metaphor for the human subject?

Janet Soskice has attempted an answer to this question by suggesting that the most successful metaphors are ones which permit limitless extensions beyond themselves.[35] Central to Soskice's understanding of metaphor, is the idea of a model of metaphor which allows for further extension. For Soskice, behind even the most literal language there lies background metaphors whose dynamic and inexhaustible capacity for extension ensure that language doesn't dry up. The all-pervasiveness of metaphor in human language, means that for Soskice,

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[35] See Janet Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1985). Soskice claims that David Tracy does not adhere to the same understanding of metaphor as herself, and categorises his work as non-realist.

inferences can be legitimately made about the nature of God from the metaphors used about Him.

> "It is our hope that a defence of metaphor and of its use as a conceptual vehicle will support the Christian in his seemingly paradoxical conviction that, despite his utter inability to comprehend God, he is justified in speaking of God and that metaphor is the principle means by which he does so."[36]

For Soskice, religious metaphors do not only tell us a great deal about the religious person's life. They also tell us about the religious *object*, i.e., God. The justification for this in Soskice's view, lies in the way that metaphors work. Metaphor relies upon a surplus of new meaning flowing from one metaphorical usage to another. Theistic talk about God is consequently bound within a "wheel of images". However, because the use of language presupposes certain innate understandings, Soskice argues that we can accept *both* that religious language is metaphorical *and yet* that it depicts reality.

> "the theist can reasonably take his talk of God, bound as it is within a wheel of images, as being reality depicting, while at the same time acknowledging its inadequacy as description."[37]

But Soskice's answer does not necessarily save us. If the most successful kind of metaphor is one that permits limitless extensions, do we have anything which can arrest meaning in such a way as to allow for a determinable outcome? Following Soskice, the best metaphors seem to lead directly towards a Derridean scenario, with meaning and truth in a state of constant flux!

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[36] Ibid., p.x.

[37] Ibid., p.141.

It will become evident that this problem does not go away and in fact is magnified in theological appropriations of Ricoeurian hermeneutics, when we look at the way Ricoeur's most ardent disciple, David Tracy, applies them. Nevertheless, the next question we must consider is the distinctive role Ricoeur believes theological language can play in relation to possibility, and in particular how we can successfully distinguish between a possibility-in-principle and a possibility-in-fact. We shall go on to see in Chapter Six, how Ricoeur's answer to this question bears upon the central claim of this thesis, that there is a fundamental flaw in the way that some revisionist theological attempts ground theological truth in the creative imagination.

3. On Theological Language and Possibility

With the apparent failure of instrumentalist models of reason as a foundation for public theological truth claims, the turn to language has been suggested as an alternative. The contemporary 'linguistic turn', has consequently led to the development of *hermeneutical* theology. 'Conversation' and 'dialogue', are the primary theological analogues of truth for this approach in theology. The great strength of this approach lies in the world of possibility that is opened to us through language. Theological language can have an essential role to play in enabling us to acquire *phronetic* sense-making skill and thus generate new possibilities. For Ricoeur, the critical principle of possibility itself, is the imagination,

> "[The imagination] is, par excellance, the instituting and the constituting of what is humanly possible.. By changing his imagination, man alters his existence"[38]

The imagination is that which makes the possibility of authenticity, and thus of the transformation of the human situation real. And for Ricoeur, it is *religious* language that is of great importance in the quest for authenticity. religious language is consequently the primary language of possibility because, for Ricoeur, religious language has a revelatory power. As the primary language of possibility religious language therefore takes precedence over poetic language, which also is disclosive of possibility. Ricoeur follows Bultmann in believing in two realms of being, the first the being of objects, the second the being of humans. Ordinary language relates to the being of objects in nature, while religious and poetic language relate to the being of humans in freedom. Like poetic language, the revelatory power of religious language, lies in its capacity to create a new way of life, and to open our eyes to "new aspects of reality, new possibilities".[39]

> "I believe that the fundamental theme of Revelation is this awakening and this call, into the heart of existence, of the imagination of the possible .... The revealed as such is an opening to existence, a possibility of existence."[40]

The distinction between religious language and poetic language for Ricoeur, is

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[38] Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth,* pp.126-7.

[39] Paul Ricoeur, "Poetry and Possibility: An Interview with Paul Ricoeur Conducted by Phillip Ried" in *The Manhattan Review* 2;2 (1982), 6-21, p.13.

[40] *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of his Work* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1978), ed. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart, p.237.

therefore a significant one. Poetic language is revelatory only in the sense of an aesthetic revelation that demands no commitment. Religious language on the other hand demands decision, and is related to a community of use. Furthermore, religious language reveals possibilities that are characterised by *limit*, what Tillich would call a depth dimension of ultimate concern, and is therefore a language which stretches normal expectations of linguistic meaningfulness. Ricoeur (and as we shall see Tracy also), holds that theological truth claims remain in the first instance about possibility in the face of limit. The notion of limit therefore has an intimate connection with possibility in Ricoeur, because it is directly reflective of the future, still-more, as-yet-unrealised possibility of authenticity.[41] Consequently, Ricoeur's hope is that the idea of possibility borne out of limit will escape the structural inconsistency of Bultmann's attempt to distinguish between a possibility-in-principle and a possibility-in-fact.

The inconsistency of Bultmann's answer to the problem, lay in the fact that the universal dimension of possibility was conditional upon the historical particularity of the Christian story. Authenticity was, in principle, available to all, but in fact only realisable through the gospel. Bultmann therefore ended up with two kinds of possibility, for which he posited a relationship between theology and philosophy that attempted to bring them both together. Ricoeur relocates Bultmann's problematic by centralising *hope for the possibility of*

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[41] Kevin Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative,* p.122.

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freedom as gift, as combined philosophical and theological categories. What makes hope for the possibility of freedom as gift *real*, is the power of the imagination. Through narrative, imagined possibilities become realised possibilities, and possibilities-in-principle become possibilities-in-fact. Ricoeur's solution therefore makes the critical leverage that makes possibilities-in-principle, possibilities-in-fact, a thing of the *imagination*. Furthermore, Ricoeur believes that the imagination can yield the public criteria necessary to distinguish between a possibility-in-principle and a possibility-in-fact. Gary Comstock agrees with Ricoeur on this point. In an article defending Ricoeur's biblical hermeneutics over against Hans Frei's, he suggests that whereas Frei sacrifices truth for meaning, Ricoeur,

> "not only thinks the [biblical] stories make truth claims, but he believes that they challenge the way modern philosophers think about truth. In being willing to say what he means by 'true' here, he lends credence to the idea that the biblical narratives make genuine, public, perhaps even revolutionary claims about what is the case."[42]

However, in focusing upon the imagined possibility of *self-authenticity* as he does, has Ricouer really chosen a concept that can effect a genuine transformation of the human situation? For Ricouer, the transformation of the human situation is synonymous with self-authenticity,

> "In the same way that a project opens up possibilities in the world, it opens up possibilities in myself and reveals me to myself.."[43]

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[42] See Gary Comstock, "Truth or Meaning: Ricoeur versus Frei on Biblical Narrative" in *Journal of Religion* 66 (1986), pp.139-140.

[43] Paul Ricoeur, *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of his Work* ed. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart, p.69. The notion of a "project" in Ricoeur, has to do with that which is the "object" of consciousness.

Also,

> "Interpretation is the process by which disclosures of new modes of being ..
> give to the subject a new capacity for knowing himself."[44]

There is little doubt that understanding theological truth in the light of possibility is a good thing. There is also little doubt that understanding theological truth in the light of imagined possibility, can help make theological truth claims have transformative potential. With Ricoeur, theological truth claims can extend to us previously *un*imagined possibilities and make them real. The eschatological and future-oriented, dimension of religious language can not only reflect a still-to-be-realised possibility, but can facilitate its realisation in the present. Furthermore, because they deal in possibility, theological truth claims can be capable of revision and need not totalise. Theological truth claims as articulations of the possible can avoid *both* being reduced to ethics *and* reified to metaphysics. Consequently, because they are revisable, theological truth claims can be public and accessible to, and facilitate the making of *phronesis,* a practical wisdom oriented towards the good life. These are the clear promises of imagined possibility for the revisability of theological truth claims. Nevertheless, we must return to the original point made about imagined possibility at the start of this Chapter. Is it right to accord all imagined possibilities equal status? The answer must clearly be no. The imagined possibility of the existence of mythical creatures is clearly of a different order to the imagined possibility of justice.

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[44] Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, Texas, Christian University Press, 1976), p.94.

Even more, is the imagined possibility of goodness, of a different order to the imagined possibility of evil! Consequently, in focussing upon the imagined possibility of *self-authenticity* has Ricoeur chosen the best of all imagined possibilities? I would argue not.

How can *self*-authenticity avoid the traps we discussed in Chapter Two, where we saw modernity's notion of selfhood fail to accord adequate status to the other as other. Ricoeur's answer is that postmodern selfhood is to be achieved through textuality and narrative.[45] But where is the evidence that selfhood is the most significant imagined possibility for the human situation? Is self-authenticity, even a postmodern textual self-authenticity, more likely to be a more genuinely transformative concept than, for example, *goodness* or *justice*? My claim is that it is not. Whereas goodness and justice are concepts that can ultimately escape the play of images that art forces upon all means of representation, self-authenticity cannot. Self-authenticity is, in the final analysis, merely a kaleidoscope of reflected notions of the self in relation to the other.[46] A concept like goodness, on the other hand, has the power to stop the play of images and thereby effect genuine transformation. This I would argue is a fundamental

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[45] Ricoeur attempts to deal with this question in *Oneself as Another* (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1992), where he puts forward the idea of a self as a "narrative text", that only finds fulfilment in publicness.

[46] Ricouer does of course have a *social* imaginary dimension to his argument - see for example *Hermeneutics and Human Sciences* - and would therefore disagree with my criticisms of his position. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that in order to overcome the criticisms I am making of his position, Ricoeur has to stretch the concept of *self*-authenticity far beyond its normal usage

distinction and one which Ricoeur does not take adequate cognizance of.

Conclusion

In this Chapter we have explored two alternative trajectories stemming from an understanding of possibility as authentic existence. We have seen the dangers of a total rejection of universalist rationality in the Heidegger-Derrida move beyond ontotheology and the idea of being as stable presence, into the constant free-play of signification in language. Furthermore, we have seen how the more moderate Heidegger-Ricoeur trajectory can allow us to permit language a degree of free-play while still holding onto some form of universalist rationality. My argument is that the problem that still remains with the Heidegger-Ricoeur trajectory concerns the fact that the goal of possibility in Ricoeur is self-understanding, and therefore returns us to the problem of the subject-centred self we explored in Chapter Two, i.e., how can self-authenticity be configured so as to avoid seeing the other as external and hostile to itself? While the promises of Ricoeurian hermeneutics may be manifold - and Tracy certainly thinks they are - there are nevertheless clearly significant pitfalls. To make a theological truth claim an imagined possibility of authentic subjectivity at the very best risks the claim that there can be no distinction between the truth claims of religion and the truth claims of art, and at the very worst risks sacrificing the primacy of the moral over the metaphysical for some individual, fictional ideal. My claim in this Chapter is that in focusing upon the imagined possibility of self-authenticity, Ricoeur risks privileging a type of imagined possibility that does not do enough

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to transform the human situation. He risks being accused of failing to sufficiently distinguish *between* different imagined possibilities. That these criticisms also apply to explicitly theological outworkings of the Heidegger-Ricoeur trajectory will be further seen in the next Chapter in the context of David Tracy's development of Ricoeurian imagined possibility as theology.

CHAPTER SIX

ON THEOLOGICAL TRUTH AS THE
IMAGINED POSSIBILITY OF SELF-AUTHENTICITY

"The truth claims of art and religion stand or fall together". David Tracy[1]

Introduction

In the last Chapter we saw how theological truth claims could be construed as imagined possibility and highlighted the weaknesses in Ricoeur's notion of the imagined possibility of self-authenticity. My criticisms of Ricouer were argued on the basis that some imagined possibilities must be given more status than others. I suggested that there are at least two types of imagined possibility. The first type, such as the imagined possibility of *goodness*, were those that can be seen to directly contribute to the transformation of the human situation. The second type, such as the imagined possibility of the existence of mythical creatures, were those that might *enhance* the human situation, but could not be proved to be *directly* conducive towards the transformation of it.[2] Consequently, I argued that since the imagined possibility of *goodness* was more likely to

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[1] David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (London, SCM Press Ltd, 1981), p.185 n.37.

[2] A third type of imagined possibility might of course be those imagined possibilities that are directly *obstructive* of the transformation of the human situation, or that suggest a negative and damaging type of transformation. Media images of violence are perhaps the most pointed example of this third type.

transform the human situation than the imagined possibility of, for example, unicorns existing, it should be accorded a different status of imagined possibility. In this Chapter I shall push this point further in the context of David Tracy's understanding of theological truth as imagined possibility. The strengths of Tracy's approach are many and the Chapter will not shrink from highlighting them. Nevertheless, the same question that I confronted Ricoeur with, will re-appear with Tracy. Consequently, two problems emerge at the end of this Chapter. First of all, if it is the case that Tracy's approach collapses religion into art, as I suggest it does, then he also, like Ricoeur must struggle to distinguish between imagined possibilities that directly contribute to the transformation of the human situation, and those that merely enhance it. Secondly, in being unable to distinguish between different imagined possibilities, Tracy leaves his theological model incapable of distinguishing between holiness and fanaticism. By the end of this Chapter an important claim about art therefore becomes apparent, that is, that art is guilty of privileging metaphysics over morals due to the *distance* that is created between an *image* and that which an image is representative of.

In this Chapter we will first explore Tracy's understanding of theological truth, then look at the motivation behind his centralisation of art as the most public of human realms, before examining the place theological truth as imagined possibility occupies in Tracy's schema. We will conclude with an assessment of the extent to which Tracy's theological model offers us an adequate *via media*

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between metaphysics and morals.

1. On Theological Truth in David Tracy

At the beginning of *Theology of Culture* Tillich paints an allegorical portrait of religion as an itinerant discipline, wandering from door to door in search of its natural home.[3] It tries the house of morality in the hope that it might find what it is seeking there, after all, "is not the ethical the nearest relative of the religious?" and is taken in but made to feel a poor relation, and forced to serve morality and deny its own independence. Next, it tries the house of knowledge and is again admitted but only for a short while before it is forcibly rejected. The third house religion tries is that of art, and here it is met with a warm welcome. But once inside religion itself hesitates, "Is the hospitality art offers to religion given unconditionally or not?" Tillich's answer, significantly, is no! David Tracy's, it appears, is yes!

Tracy is an eclectic thinker whose interests range widely, and attract attention from a variety of sources. A role call of his influences would at the very least have to include Bernard Lonergan, Paul Tillich, Mircea Eliade, Langdon Gilkey, Paul Ricoeur and Hans-George Gadamer, all of whose work, Tracy can be said to have assimilated into his own. As T. Howland Shanks says,

> "(Tracy) listens to a wide variety of voices, always on the lookout for elements of truth. Tracy is a truth-seeker who does not flee complexity, and seeks to include as many voices as possible in the conversation that is contemporary

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[3] Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (London, Oxford University Press, 1959), p.6.

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theology."[4]

It is because of both the influences Tracy assimilates within his theology and his proposal that theology should be a hermeneutic venture, that qualifies him as a good example of how an approach to revisable theological truth claims can work internally within a religious tradition.[5] At the outset Tracy speaks from an intellectually pluralist position and to a pluralist situation. In particular he is committed to the ideal of public theology, to the priority of dialogue, and to the development of a theological method that makes room for the Christian world-view without privileging it. As a Roman Catholic priest and Professor of Theology, David Tracy has dual commitments to both the Church and the Academy. Nevertheless, the driving force behind Tracy's theology is a commitment to the ideal of the *aesthetic* as a paradigmatically *public* sphere, and is in that sense deeply committed to Kant's *Third Critique* as the paradigm *magnum opus* on symbolic theology.[6] How religion relates to this sphere, is in terms of religion as a representative phenomenon, and theological truth claims as expressive of the imagined possibility of self-authenticity.

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[4] See T. Howland Shanks, "David Tracy's Theological Project: An Overview and some Implications", in *Theological Studies* 54 (1993), pp.698-727, p.699.

[5] See Charles W. Allen, "The Primacy of *Phronesis*: A Proposal for Avoiding frustrating Tendencies in Our Conceptions of Rationality", in *The Journal of Religion,* 69 (1989), pp.359-374, p.371, n.39 for a parallel between his own work and that of David Tracy's in arguing that conversations with classics *cannot* be replaced by arguments about them.

[6] See Phillip Rossi, "Kant as the Father of Symbolic Theology: Hope and the Symbols of Christian Faith", *Philosophy Today* 25 (1981), pp.24-33.

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A brief overview of Tracy's interests shows that his concern about theological truth claims has long been focused upon the question of method in theology. His dissertation for the Doctorate in Sacred Theology at the Gregorian University of Rome was on the subject of Bernard Lonergan, and gave an early indication of his interests.[7] His first published work *The Achievement of Bernard Lonergan (1970)* focused upon the question of method in theology with a detailed exposition of Lonergan's own views. Although clearly indebted to Lonergan's own concern with the question of method (especially as expressed in *Method in Theology*), Tracy was not uncritical of him, and in a paper delivered at the Lonergan Congress 1970 said that Lonergan's understanding of the task of theology did not provide sufficiently critical grounds for the,

> "truth-value of the claims to ultimacy of religious and explicitly theological language."[8]

Rooting Lonergan's failure in his tendency to minimise the consequences of historical-consciousness, Tracy suggests that Lonergan's blind acceptance of the authority of the dogmatic tradition did not suffice for a contemporary foundational theology.[9] Tracy summed up his work on Lonergan with a

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[7] David Tracy, "Lonergan's Interpretation of St. Thomas Aquinas: The Intellectualist Nature of Speculative Theology", (diss. Gregorian University, Rome, 1969).

[8] David Tracy, "Lonergan's Foundational Theology: An Interpretation and a Critique", in *Foundations of Theology: Papers from the International Lonergan Congress* 1970, (ed.) Phillip McShane (Dublin, Gill & MacMillan, 1971) p.214.

[9] It should be noted that the term foundational theology is used in Tracy's earlier work. In later work he replaces it with the term fundamental theology. This is not to be confused with fundamentalism, since Tracy's fundamental theology operates within the scope of a transcendental philosophy i.e. a philosophy committed to the identification of the a priori conditions of knowledge itself. For a good description of fundamental theology from a Protestant

challenge to the theological community and a description of the task ahead of it. He claimed that historical consciousness had so undermined the previously secure assumptions that lay behind theological truth claims that the contemporary theologian must face head-on the question as to what the prior conditions are, that make religious and theological truth claims possible. In this explicitly transcendentalist mode, Tracy therefore embarked upon his next major work *Blessed Rage for Order* (1975), which attempted to address this very question. In this work, Tracy advanced a particular method, termed revisionist, by which the truth-conditions of the claims of the Christian tradition may be identified and evaluated. This method drew heavily upon the work of Paul Tillich, and involved the correlation of the meanings present in common human experience and language, with the meanings present in the Christian fact.[10] The five principle arguments of *Blessed Rage for Order* are helpfully laid out in summary theses. These include:-

> Thesis 1: "The Two Principal Sources for Theology Are Christian Texts and Common Human Experience".

> Thesis 2: "The Theological Task Will Involve a Critical Correlation of the Results of the Investigations of the Two Sources of Theology."

> Thesis 3: The Principle Method of Investigation of the Source "Common Human Experience and Language" Can Be Described as a Phenomenology of the "Religious Dimension" Present in Everyday and Scientific Experience and

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perspective see Gerhard Ebeling, *The Study of Theology* (Fortress Press, 1980), Chapter 12.

[10] Where Tracy departs from Tillich's method of correlation is over his claim that Tillich's method suggests that a critical correlation need only be made between the questions of the "situation" and the answers provided by the Christian "message". This however does not go far enough because for Tracy, both the questions and the answers given in the "situation" must be included in the process. See David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1975), p.46.

Language".

Thesis 4: "The Principle Method of Investigation of the Source "the Christian Tradition" Can be Described as an Historical and Hermeneutical Investigation of Classic Christian Texts".

Thesis 5: "To Determine the Truth-Status of the Results of One's Investigations into the Meaning of Both Common Human Experience and Christian Texts the Theologian Should Employ an Explicitly Transcendental or Metaphysical Mode of Reflection".[11]

In *Blessed Rage for Order* Tracy suggests that there are two sources for theology: (1): common human experience and language, and (2): the Christian tradition. The first source is to be understood as disclosing a religious dimension, defined primarily using Ricoeur's notion of limit, and is to be investigated using Ricoeurian hermeneutics. The second source, defined primarily using Tracy's notion of the *classic*, is to be investigated using historical and hermeneutical analyses. The results of these investigations are to be correlated to establish points of contact, and the resultant truth-status of these findings determined by an explicitly metaphysical mode of analysis.[12] The task of interpreting such findings is a transcendental one in the sense that it aims at revealing the conditions of the very possibility of experience itself.[13] Classics (texts, images, rituals and symbols), are the vehicles which disclose these possibilities.

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[11] David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order,* pp.52-56.

[12] Tracy's own treatment of this question is neatly summarised in the section titled "Religion and Morality: Identical or Distinct?" in *Blessed Rage for Order*, pp.100f.

[13] Tracy is happy to attribute the symbolic model of theological truth claims to Kant, saying that, "an explosion of symbolic forms was championed first by Kant's argument in the Third Critique that the symbol possesses the ability to think more than the concept can conceive". See "Literary Theory and return of the Forms for Naming and Thinking God" in *Journal of Religion,* 74:3 (1994), pp.302-319, p.309.

Feeling that enough had not been said on the question of the historical and hermeneutical analysis of the Christian text, Tracy's next project was to devise a comprehensive theory of the Christian text which allowed for both, the particular claims of the Christian faith-community and the interests of the wider public. Tracy expressed this concern in an article in *Christian Century* in 1975,

> "What systematic model, informed by the criteria determined for fundamental theological discourse, will allow a specific historical community of faith to articulate its particular vision of reality in a manner that makes it available for the wider community without being wrenched from its own historical experience?"[14]

His answer to this question was comprehensively delivered in *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (1981), and culminates in his theory of the classic.[15] In this work, Tracy's twin concerns about method and publicness in theology are given explicit treatment in the context of the nature of the truth claims of systematic theology. The strategy by which the truth claims of systematic theology are to be appropriated is governed by the demand of publicness, and Part One of the book is a theoretical justification of this claim. All that purports to be authentic theology, is public discourse, discourse available in principle to all persons. It is therefore with the

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[14] David Tracy, "Theology as Public Discourse" in *Christian Century* 92:10 (1975), p.280.

[15] For Tracy, all major religious traditions produce classics, defined as, "those events texts, images, rituals, or symbols which disclose permanent possibilities or meaning and truth", nevertheless, what defines a *religious* classic is that, "explicitly religious classic expressions will involve a claim to truth as the event of a disclosure-concealment of the whole of reality by the power of the whole - as in some sense a radical and finally gracious mystery." See *The Analogical Imagination*, p.68.

question of publicness uppermost in Tracy's mind that *The Analogical Imagination* forges a close link between art and religion, arguing that the privatisation of religion in modernity is intimately connected to the privatisation and the subjectivisation of the aesthetic. Consequently, art for Tracy is a "realised experience of an event of truth".[16] What art does for us, is offer us new possibilities of self-understanding, wherein, we,

> "lose our usual self-consciousness and finally encounter a rooted self - a self transformed into both new possibility and the actuality of rootedness." [17]

Tracy's stress on the publicness of art is an important one for the coherence of his approach, and a point which we shall return to later. In Kierkegaard, the aesthetic, moral and religious trinity has the *moral* in the realm of public experience, and the aesthetic and the religious in the realm of the individual. (See Appendix B:)

> "Ethics and the ethical, as constituting the essential anchorage for all individual existence, have an indefeasible claim upon every existing individual."[18]

For Tracy, art is public, and as we shall see by the end of this Chapter, it would appear morality is in danger of being *private*! To an extent then, where Tracy's project begins to go wrong is in the link he makes between art and religion, whereby the publicness of art and the publicness of religion force the further

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[16] Ibid., p.111.

[17] Ibid., p.114.

[18] Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1941), tr. D F. Swenson and W Lowrie, p.119.

identification of the aesthetic with the spiritual. While art is disclosive of possibilities of *self*-authenticity, it is nevertheless that realm of authentic publicness where "only the paradigmatic is real".[19] In forging a link between art and religion Tracy intends to re-establish the basis upon which theological truth claims can have truth status.[20] His claim is that hermeneutical interpretation is a fundamental characteristic of theology, and that there is consequently a correlation between the way that truth is arrived at through interpretation in the realm of art, and the way truth is arrived at in the realm of religion.

> "By understanding systematic theology as fundamentally a hermeneutic enterprise, the issue of both the meaning and truth of religion is related to the analogous issue of the meaning and truth of art."[21]

Consequently,

> "The claims to truth in both art and religion.. stand or fall together."[22]

Integral to the task of the systematic theology is therefore the idea that,

> "systematic theologians, by definition, will understand themselves as radically finite and historical thinkers who have risked a trust in a particular religious tradition. They seek therefore, to retrieve, interpret, translate, mediate the resources - the questions and answers, form and content, the subject matter - of the classic events of understanding of those fundamental religious questions embedded in the classic events, images, persons, rituals, texts and symbols of

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[19] David Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, p.112.

[20] Tracy's commitment to the priority of art is further evidenced in the way that he has most recently been defending the christo*morphic* character of theology. He states his position quite bluntly, "Theology is not christocentric but theocentric, although it is so only by means of its christomorphism". See, David Tracy, "Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity", *Readings in Modern Theology: Britain and America* (SPCK, London, 1995), ed. R. Gill, p.232.

[21] David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination,* p.x.

[22] Ibid., p.185 n.37.

a tradition."[23]

In describing theology as a hermeneutical enterprise, Tracy is taking full cognizance of the problem of interpretation we discussed in Chapter One. His approach to theological truth is therefore one which attempts to implement the insight that "all interpretation is a mediation of past and present".[24] That, following Gadamer, to understand is to *converse well*, and that furthermore,

> "real conversation occurs only when the participants allow the question to assume primacy."[25]

Where the meaning and truth of religion and the meaning and truth of art meet for Tracy, is in the notion of the classic. Following Ricoeur, Tracy knows that, "the experience of understanding occurs in linguistic form", consequently, the excess of meaning that any text carries, demands constant interpretation. Thus the classic is deemed so, because in it,

> "an event of understanding proper to finite human beings has here found disclosure"[26].

What such an "event of understanding" discloses to us is a new way of understanding *ourselves*,

> "the reader overcomes the strangeness of another horizon not by empathizing with the psychic state or cultural situation of the author but rather by understanding the basic vision of the author implied by the text and the mode-of-being-in-the-world referred to by the text"[27].

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[23] Ibid., p.104.

[24] Ibid., p.99.

[25] Ibid., p.101.

[26] Ibid., p.102.

[27] Ibid., p.102.

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Thus, the classic is a foil for the disclosure of an authentic self-understanding. If genuine, the classic will confront the horizons that govern our present experience with the possibility that "something else might be the case".[28] The truth that classics disclose, is in the final analysis, "an experience that upsets conventional opinions and expands the sense of the possible".[29] The possibility that is expanded in the experience of the classic, is fundamentally the possibility of a new *self-understanding*,

> "who is this 'I' that finds itself needing interpretation rather than contemplative reconstruction? The 'I' is none other than the human being who knows the self as, in fact, what Heidegger called a 'thrown projection'."[30]

Tracy's flirtation with overtly postmodern works is an attempt to further assert the priority of the aesthetic as a public sphere,

> "Postmodern theology at its best is not a rival set of propositions to modern theology. It is something else: a search for entirely new forms."[31]

The emphasis Tracy places upon *form* is significant in this respect.[32] Tracy believes that the concept has been the dominant legitimating form for modernity.

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[28] Ibid., p.102.

[29] Ibid., p.108.

[30] Ibid., p.103.

[31] David Tracy, *On Naming the Present: God, Hermeneutics and Church* (London, SCM Press Ltd., 1994), p.45.

[32] See David Tracy, "Literary Theory and the Return of the Forms for Naming and Thinking God in Theology". According to Tracy, Hegel alone of all the modern philosophers saw the history of form as a central task, and raised its significance beyond the polarities of an understanding which posits content as the *opposite* of form.

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This has led to the various 'isms' that are fundamentally divisive. What is needed is an "ethics of resistance" to the destructive powers of the 'ism'. This is what postmodernity provides. For Tracy, the distinctiveness of a religious classic is ultimately not in terms of its conceptual content, which is contextual and relative, but in terms of its form. It is only therefore with attention to form that the question of what religion adds to ethics can take on any real meaning. But the insight that a theological return to form affords us brings more than just a postmodern imperative towards conversation and dialogue,

> "The history of theology is the history of the ever-shifting relationship between the reality of God and that divine reality as experienced and understood from within a logos".[33]

Theology, even conceived hermeneutically, is therefore a *theocentric* enterprise for Tracy; one which correlates the "awesome, frightening, interruptive reality of God" with the horizons of understanding such a divine reality is conceived within.[34] The unambiguous theocentricity and implicit theological realism of Tracy's later theological model is therefore clear,

> "at its best postmodern theology is an honest if sometimes desperate attempt to let God as God be heard again; disrupting modern historical consciousness, unmasking the pretensions of modern rationality, demanding that attention be paid to all those others forgotten and marginalised by the modern project. Theos has returned to unsettle the dominance of the modern logos... God is once again the dominant partner in the theological correlation."[35]

Furthermore,

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[33] David Tracy, *On Naming the Present,* p.36.

[34] Ibid., p.36.

[35] Ibid., p.37.

"This God reveals God-self in hiddenness, in cross and negativity, above all in the suffering of all those others whom the grand narrative of modernity has set aside as non-peoples, non-events, non-memories, non-history."[36]

This new revelation of God therefore takes place most radically in the "interruptive experience and memory of suffering itself", in the light of which, "the modern 'isms' for God suddenly seem inconsequential."[37] Consequently, in an effort to escape the logocentricity that the 'ism' generates,

"the other and the different come forward now as central intellectual categories across all the major disciplines including theology."[38]

These categories are, however, not merely ideas that will repeat the logocentric commitment of modernity. They bear all the hallmarks of the radically transgressive otherness of revolution.

"The other and the different - both those from other cultures and those not accounted for by the grand-narrative of the dominant culture - return with full force to unmask the social-evolutionary narrative of modernity as ultimately an alibi-story - not a plausible reading of our human history together."[39]

Although modernity has had positive effects (Tracy says the turn to the subject can be seen as emancipatory and entrapping), it has now become clear that the dynamic of modernity has been to level all differences with a relentlessness that

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[36] Ibid., p.43.

[37] Ibid., p.43.

[38] David Tracy, "Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity', *Readings in Modern Theology: Britian and America,* p.229.

[39] Ibid., p.229.

has increased marginalisation and conflict, not the reverse.[40] Not only other cultures, but history itself, "the last outpost of the other and different", has in modernity become a *tabula rasa* for the perpetuation of all that has been before. The time has therefore come, for a move beyond modernity. Modernity's crowning barbarism has been to suggest that modernity itself is the glorious climax of history, that,

> "soon all other traditions, all other cultures will quietly fade away as the grand social evolutionary schema of modern liberalism lulls all to rest with the secret promise of making everything (and everyone) just one more expression of the same good liberal worldview."[41]

However, for Tracy, modernity itself has developed and maintained a commitment to its own specialised form for evaluating theological truth claims.

> "What modernity provides is a series of seemingly endless debates on the correct 'ism'.. the correct set of abstract propositions for naming and thinking God."[42]

This has consequently prevented the development of a pluralism of forms for naming God. The various 'isms' that modernity threw up as absolutes, necessitated the triumph of one over the subjugation of the others, hence, there could be no real pluralism in modernity. Never before has it become so obvious that modernity has failed to adequately represent the deepest most enduring reality of all, for,

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[40] Ibid., p.225.

[41] Ibid., p.227.

[42] David Tracy, "Literary Theory and the Return of the Forms for Naming and Thinking God in Theology", p.307.

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"there is no set of abstract propositions, no rational clear and distinct ideas, no sublating concept, no rational propositional doctrine - in a word no -ism - that is ever adequate for naming and thinking God."[43]

Furthermore, modernity's chosen form of "decontextualised abstract propositions articulated in accordance with the demands of modern rational argument" *excludes* other forms, and does not permit of a plurality of voices in the conversation.[44] Ultimately therefore, the conflict of 'isms' in modernity, fails not only to incorporate religion as a dialogue partner, but fails also to provide a secure basis for dialogue itself.

For Tracy, the sheer theological diversity of our own time, can thus be directly attributed to the identification of modernity's over-reliance upon this one form, and was prefigured in Kant's critical transcendentalism.[45] What the return to form means, distinctively for Christian theology, is a move beyond modernity's insistence that God's *existence* is a prior question to God's *identity,* expressed biblically as the question of the name of God. The dominant question for contemporary Christian theology is therefore not *does* God exist, but,

"who is God as God has named Godself in and through all the forms of God's

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[43] Ibid., p.310.

[44] Ibid., p.309.

[45] Ibid., p.309. For Tracy, the impact of attention to form can be found not just in the "high" Romantics but in Schelling's philosophy of myth; Kierkegaard's understanding of genre; Nietzche on style; Tillich on symbol; Eliade on the morphology of the sacred; Hegel on the modern concept of the Absolute; and finally Ricoeur's reversal of Hegel in a "hermeneutics of the polymorphic forms of the absolute".

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biblical name."[46]

Gone at least then, is any notion that Tracy believes in an easy resolution to the problems of pluralism. Gone then is the picture of Tracy as a frustrated liberal foundationalist intent on securing a stable centre from which to construct yet another grand-narrative. Tracy suggests that there is no such centre to be found and rejects this view of his work. Even postmodern readings of modernity cannot assume impartiality, they also are culpable in the barbarisms of modernity. What postmodernity can do, at its best, is demonstrate an "ethics of resistance" to,

> "the same unquestioned sameness of the modern turn to the subject, the modern over-belief in the search for the perfect method, the modern social-evolutionary narrative whereby all is finally and endlessly more of the same."[47]

There are, for Tracy, a multitude of forms of the turn to the other in postmodernity, however the ethical resistance of every form is an interruption of the role of more of the same. Tracy thinks that what theology needs to do is take a new look at the relationship between forms of thinking God and naming God. This involves an examination of the relationship between form and context, and becomes a dialectical and *transgressive* form of thought, which participates in an "event-gift-revelation of the Other".[48]

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[46] Ibid., p.309. Tracy pays tribute to Barth's work in drawing attention to the question of the forms for naming God in the biblical literature, as well as his work in particular on the forms for naming God in the passion narratives.

[47] David Tracy, "Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity", *Readings in Modern Theology: Britain and America*, p.228.

[48] Ibid., p.230.

What distinguishes this understanding of theology from earlier dialectical theology (e.g., Karl Barth's), which also centralised categories of event language and revelation language, is the completeness with which it seeks to transgress modern thought forms.[49] The return of event language and revelation language in theology, is an attempt to,

> "disrupt or intercept the continuities and similarities masking the increasing deadening sameness of the modern world-view."[50]

Many forms of contemporary philosophy also demonstrate such transgressiveness, some even negating the distinction between philosophy and theology (e.g. Mark.C.Taylor). Tracy consequently finds allies in thinkers who also attempt to centralise notions of otherness and difference and thus contribute to the project of transgressing the apparently immoveable *logos* of modernity. Like a true theological magpie, Tracy is happy to feed off a variety of sources and claim that theology has finally become a,

> "transgressive postmodern option that disrupts all totalisations. [It will] never again be tameable by a system - any system - modern or premodern or postmodern. For theology does not bespeak a totality."[51]

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[49] For many, Barth's theology *is* a complete transgression of modern thought forms. See for example, Robert Jenson, *Alpha & Omega: A Study in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh, Nelson, 1963), "To put it somewhat crudely, Barth has solved the problem of the disappearance of the timeless by retaining the general structure of classical theology but putting the historical event of Jesus' existence in the place formerly occupied by changeless 'Being'.", p.140.

[50] David Tracy, "Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity", *Readings in Modern Theology: Britain and America*, p.230.

[51] Ibid., p.235. The following sentence reads "Christian theology at its best is the voice of the other through all those others who have tasted prophetically and meditatively, the Infinity disclosed in the kenotic reality of Jesus Christ". Though it has not been a concern of this thesis, the extent to which there is anything specifically Christian in Tracy's theological model, is a vital point that others have challenged him on. See for example Gareth Jones, *Critical Theology* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1995) p125.

What postmodernity offers us is an attempt to, "think the unthought of modernity"[52]. Postmodernity is consequently a "form of formlessness which is neither modern or premodern."[53] The acts of resistance that postmodernity invites us to join in on, are consequently acts of,

> "resistance to the temptations of a complacent, humanist, self-image; resistance to an alinguistic and ahistorical consciousness; [and] resistance to the onto-theo-logical complacency of all the modern -isms."[54]

The heart of Tracy's interest in postmodern forms of thought comes out in his attempt to answer the question concerning the role of the *image* in the spiritual life. Identifying deconstruction with strands within Buddhism, Tracy says,

> "My own belief is that the nearest affinity to Buddhist thought is to be found in certain contemporary strands of postmodern thought like that of Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida."[55]

In doing this it is evident that Tracy has increasingly employed the language of 'otherness' and 'difference' for no apparent reason other than to keep understandings of spirituality tied to understandings of art. In traditional models of Christian spirituality an *apophatic* approach has stressed that the 'ascent' to God is through the gradual shedding of images used in the pursuit of holiness.

(Cambridge, Polity Press, 1995) p125.

[52] David Tracy, "Literary theory and Return of the Forms for Naming and Thinking God", p.313.

[53] Ibid., p.312.

[54] Ibid., p.314.

[55] David Tracy, *Dialogue With The Other: The Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Louvain, Peeters Press, 1990), p.70.

By contrast a *kataphatic* approach emphasises the necessity of images and the dependency of the holy life upon something more than the endless negation of images by which knowledge of God is attained. The apophatic and negative character of much of Tracy's later work is indeed striking. The twin engines of 'otherness' and 'difference' combine their power in theology as 'transgressive'; never offering consoling 'isms', but revealing God in hiddenness, negativity and suffering.

> "Derrida and Deleuze with their distinct but related notions of difference and their critique of all dialectics as dis-allowing difference by rendering differences as dialectical opposites joined to the indecidability of all meaning through our need to use langauge, bear some remarkable family resemblances to Nagarjuna's anti-dialectical, yet dialectical insistence on the indecidability of all thought in language." [56]

In a discussion concerning the Christian-Buddhist inter-religious dialogue in *Dialogue With the Other*, Tracy explores the thinking of Meister Eckhart. According to Tracy, Eckhart's spirituality parallels much Buddhist spirituality with its emphasis on intellectualism and detachment.[57] An intense intellectualism (characteristic of the Dominican Order), leading to radical detachment, is the cornerstone of both Eckhartian and Buddhist spirituality. Although in the final analysis Tracy suggests Eckhart cannot be seen to be as radically apophatic as the Buddhist parallels suggest, nevertheless, both Eckhartian and Buddhist spirituality tend to privilege radical detached

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[56] Ibid., p.70.

[57] Rudolph Otto thinks Eckhart is most closely paralleled with Shankara, see for example, Rudolph Otto, *Mysticism East and West* 1932 (New York, Meridian Books, 1957). Tr. Bertha L. Bracey and Richenda C. Payne, while D T. Suzuki thinks a better parallel is with Nagarjuna, cf., D T. Suzuki *Mysticism; Christian and Buddhist* (New York, Harper, 1957).

contemplation *above* all forms of imaged contemplation. Eckhart's "Godhead-beyond-God", encountered in the negation of all language about God is ultimately a non-dialectical entity free from all images.

Nevertheless, Tracy is quick to balance this apophaticism with a kataphatic corollary. The Flemish thinker Jan Van Ruysbroek, in the same Chapter of *Dialogue With the Other*, is shown to be a better model of the spiritual life. Van Ruysbroek illustrates the fundamental inadequacy of all language naming God, but keeps alive the idea that God's essence is always dialectically self-manifesting, and therefore shows a way *beyond* the endless negation of a fully apophatic theology to a return to imaged contemplation. Therefore while Tracy insists on the place apophaticism must have in theology, he is careful to show that theology cannot remain wholly apophatic.

> "We cannot finally stay with the Buddhist..nor even with Meister Eckhart."[58]

2: On the Publicness of the Aesthetic, and the Imagined possibility of Self-Authenticity.

Even given the postmodern ambiguities that Tracy seems to delight in, he would not contest the claim that theological truths represent *imagined* possibilities.[59]

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[58] David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other,* p.94.

[59] Both Gary Comstock and Hans Frei criticise Tracy for adopting terminology which is "insufficiently pragmatic" (Comstock), and "complex, esoteric and obscurantist" (Hans Frei), thus complicating, rather than clarifying the issues at stake. See G L. Comstock, "Everything Depends upon the Type of the Concepts that the Interpretation is Made to Convey: Max Kadushin among the Narrative Theologians" in *Modern Theology* 5:3 (1989), pp.215-237, p.22. Also, Hans Frei, "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does it Stretch or Will

Tracy's postmodern theology is an attempt to move beyond all forms of cognitive absolutism and the institutional realities they engender.[60] It is an attempt to move beyond cultural imperialism, and the hollow trumpetings of the ecclesia; beyond even the liberal models of modernity, that end in ever more-of-the-same, and thus conflict. At the same time, it is an attempt to remain faithful to God, by appropriating 'otherness' and 'difference' critically and yet constructively.[61] Nevertheless, in the final analysis it is fair to conclude that Tracy's half-hearted postmodernism is *not* an attempt like that of Mark C. Taylor's or Kevin Hart's to articulate a postmodern apophatic theology.[62] It is more of an attempt to establish the viability of the *aesthetic* as that *public* sphere of human experience where finally all differences are levelled; where truth may find a soil it can take root in and prosper. For Tracy, the arcane devices of postmodern interpretation are not designed to take us higher or deeper into truth, but are designed to throw us back upon symbol, metaphor, narrative and image, as our *only* allies in the quest for truth.

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it Break?" in *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986), ed. F. McConnell, pp.36-7.

[60] Gareth Jones, *Critical Theology,* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1995), p.115.

[61] David Tracy, *On Naming the Present,* p.139. The question we have not dealt with in this Chapter, which is of course a pressing one, is to what extent Tracy's schema necessitate's a *realist* God. If God, is that which in the final analysis preserves faith's critical moment, then should not Tracy be prepared to admit that religious language is much more than *analogical?*

[62] See for example Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984); and Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989).

With regards to Tracy's model of theological truth as an imagined possibility of self-authenticity we can therefore state two points very clearly. Firstly, the possibility of authenticity that theological truth offers is - like Ricoeur - in the first instance imagined. For Tracy, this is so because the aesthetic is the most public of human spheres; only through the publicness of the aesthetic can knowledge and understanding be meaningful. Secondly, the possibility of authenticity that theological truth offers is of *self*-authenticity. Classics are repositories of the power of the creative imagination to generate new possibilities of self-authenticity in the face of limit. Nevertheless, the net impact of Tracy's model of theological truth forces the collapse of the distinction between religion and art, where a classic of art is indistinguishable from a classic of religion. This of course is entirely Tracy's intention, and responds to a number of issues he is concerned with. However, in collapsing the truth claims of art and religion, Tracy is in danger of two errors. Firstly, of reducing that which religion is representative of, to the capacity for aesthetic experience.[63] Secondly, of forcing morality out of the public sphere and into the realm of the individual.

Whether this latter point is the *necessary* result of the centralisation of art is not apparent. As already stated Kierkegaard held the moral sphere to be public, and the aesthetic and spiritual to be private. This served the dual function of accounting for the confusion that can exist between art and religion, *and* made

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[63] For Ricouer this would be being, but as we shall see in Chapter Seven for Stewart Sutherland and Iris Murdoch, it would be the Good.

sure that the spiritual realm was one that was capable of providing resources for dealing with the kind of suffering that is encountered *only* at the level of the individual. Tracy's theology clearly lacks this capacity, relying as it does on the power of art to soothe away our fears. Nevertheless, whether the centrality of art *also* of necessity means the privatisation of morals, as Kierkegaard's model implies, is not certain.

Authentic self-understanding undoubtedly *issues in* morality in Tracy's schema. Nevertheless, what such morality is generated *by* is art. In holding to this view Tracy does therefore appear to renege on the commitment to *praxis* that was discussed in Chapter Three. If, as was argued in Chapter Three, *praxis* is vital in the realm of theological truth and can be seen to facilitate the realisation of possibility (as Ernest Bloch suggests), then is art, really the realm where *praxis* is best discovered? [64] [65]

More evidence of the fact that Tracy's model of theological truth may well force morality into the sphere of the individual, comes from Neo-Marxist sources. The

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[64] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope,* 3 vols (Cambridge; Mass:, MIT Press, 1986) (trs.) Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight, p.242.

[65] Some philosophies of art answer yes to this question. Arising from a disillusionment with the triviality of 'bourgeois' art, Dadaism tries to create a critical art form that believes that, "the highest art will be that which in its conscious content presents the thousandfold problems of the day, the art which has been visibly shattered by the explosions of last week, which is forever trying to collect its limbs after yesterday's crash." As we shall see in the Conclusion, this view of art is probably one that Iris Murdoch would be happy to agree with. See the "Dadaist Manifesto", Berlin, 1918, quoted in Tristan Tzara, *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries* (London, Cable, 1992), tr. Barbara Wright.

issue of the power of theological truth to realise the possibility of a transformed *society* is taken up, though for different reasons, by Charles Davis in *Religion and the Making of Society*. Here, Davis explores the constraints any form of theology experiences when it tries to perform a substantial societal critique in such a way as to effect transformation.[66] Davis argues that access to truth can only be through *activity directed towards transforming society*. Using Marx's condemnation of religion as mere theory *divorced* from practice, i.e., ideology, Davis says,

> "to suppose a once-for-all revelation to anticipate that faith will remain identical with itself, is for Marx, to fall into ideology because it is in effect a denial of concrete history and an escape into abstraction,"[67]

Consequently,

> "faith, together with theology, cannot be genuinely a protest against the social order unless it acknowledges that it itself and its own past history as the product of alienated society must be submitted to criticism and revolutionary transformation"[68]

What Davis therefore suggests for theology is that it must render the tradition it stems from completely open to a radical re-evaluation. In apparent conflict with Tracy's revisionist model for a fundamental theology, Davis says,

> "To remain on the hermeneutic level - in other words to engage in a process of re-interpretation - is to acknowledge the tradition as essentially meaningful. But existing social traditions have to be explained and transcended not

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[66] See Charles Davis, *Religion and the Making of Society: Essays in Social Theology,* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994).

[67] Ibid., p.79.

[68] Ibid., p.78.

interpreted."[69]

For Davis, theology must be radically self-critical of the tradition it stems from,

> "it must renounce an a priori claim to self-identity and universality (because) not to do so is to continue with the idealists to seek salvation in a theoretical reconciliation of the contradictions of human history".[70]

So how does Tracy's approach square with Davis's claims? Is Tracy successful in defending theology as capable of the critical thrust Davis thinks it needs? Can Tracy's model facilitate the transformation of a possibility-in-principle into a possibility-in-fact? Like Davis, Werner Jeanrond thinks not and has criticised Tracy along the same lines. Jeanrond suggests that Tracy's model does not have real transformative power, and consequently needs to be linked,

> "dialectically to the development of principles and strategies of Christian action in the world."[71]

Tracy would of course argue that his work can only be understood in the context of the distinction he makes between fundamental theology (also termed foundational), systematic theology and practical theology.[72] For Tracy, the task

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[69] Ibid., p.78.

[70] Ibid., p.91.

[71] Werner G. Jeanrond, "Biblical Criticism and Theology: Toward a New Biblical Theology", in *Radical Pluralism and Truth: David Tracy and the Hermeneutics of Religion*, (New York, Crossroad, 1991), pp.45-47.

[72] Tracy's three-fold theological schema sees each of three theological disciplines, referring to three distinct publics; fundamental theology has its locus in the academic public, systematic theology in the ecclesial public and practical theology in the social public. These distinctions bears similarities to Marcus Varro's distinctions between natural/philosophical theology (represented in the academy), mythical theology (represented in the poets and theatre) and civil theology (represented in political publics), which Augustine analysed but ultimately dismissed. See *City of God*, Book VI, Chapters 5-12, (tr.) H. Bettenson (New York, Penguin Books, 1972).

of a contemporary fundamental theology is best understood as,

> "philosophical reflection upon both the meanings disclosed in our common human experience and the meanings disclosed in the primary texts of the Christian tradition."[73]

Consequently, the place *experience* occupies in a model for fundamental theology is not necessarily the same for a practical theology. Tracy would therefore argue that by forging disciplinary distinctions between the various tasks that theology attempts to involve itself in, he escapes any interpretation of his work beyond the context he believes it is applicable to.[74] He would suggest that it is unfair to criticise his *fundamental* theology as if it were meant to be *practical* theology. But can Tracy's defence stand? Notwithstanding the fact that his long-awaited third volume has not yet arrived for scrutiny, many political and liberation theologians would argue that their practical theologies *are* fundamental and systematic and address all three of Tracy's publics. The question therefore has to be asked, as Matthew Lamb does, whether Tracy's distinctions are an,

> "unintentional way of immunising the disciplines of foundations and systematics against the claims of liberation and political theologies?"[75]

If Lamb's criticism of Tracy is pertinent, then it seems that Tracy's

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[73] David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, p.237.

[74] Matthew Lamb suggests that Tracy's distinctions between fundamental, systematic and practical theology, are not so much *disciplines* as "attempts to articulate, within what Lonergan would term "the foundational speciality" of theology, the general and special categories relative to intellectual, religious and moral conversion processes". See Lamb, "Communicative Praxis and Theology: Beyond Modern Nihilism and Dogmatism", *Habermas, Modernity and Public Theology* (New York, Crossroad, 1992), ed. Don S. Browning and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, p.94 n.72.

[75] Ibid., p.81.

understanding of the transformational role the imagined possibility of self-authenticity can have in the social sphere must inevitably privilege *individual* transformation over *social* transformation. If this is correct then Tracy *is* guilty of maintaining the frustrated dynamic of liberal social criticism which he himself tries to escape.

This point is made again when we see that, for Tracy, theological truth claims ultimately *cannot* be freed from the level of hermeneutics as aesthetics. Tracy admits this much when he says that a critical social theory must be completed by a,

> "hermeneutical aspect [which] would need the reinterpretation of the societal and projective [future] limit-possibilities disclosed by the Christian symbols."[76]

Why this is so for Tracy can perhaps be explained with reference to the weaknesses we pointed out in Chapter Two, when we looked at the potential of communicative rationality as a paradigm of reason for revisable theological truth. We saw then that Habermas lacked the ability to identify the ultimate *end* of communicative action, and our suggestion was therefore, that it was perhaps an *eschatological* dimension that distinguished theological truth claims. If this is the case then Tracy may well be doing us a service in insisting upon a return to

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[76] David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, p.247. Note that in the footnote for this quotation Tracy says, "It should be noted that the same methodological rule on the need for a hermeneutical collaboration of the limit-situations of the religious dimension of our common human experience and the limit-language of the Christian religious tradition ...would be applicable to theological discussions of praxis.", p.257 n.47.

symbol, to hermeneutics and to art, in order for us to realise the *eschaton* towards which morality is pointed. Nevertheless, in the final analysis, with Tracy's model of theological truth, it is difficult to see how any attempt to mark out the distinctive contribution religion can make to ethics can succeed if the critical principle of a theological truth claim is thought of as the imagined possibility of self-authenticity. In following Tracy, do we not inevitably end up subscribing to a self/social dichotomy and perpetuate the ghettoisation of theological truth claims even more? Tracy warns us at the outset that the validity of the truth claims of art and religion stand or fall together, but is there not a way of preserving both, that does not involve the surrender of religion to art and the relegation of theology to the sphere of the individual?

Tracy wishes to suggest that religion offers something distinctive to our conceptions of art and form, but before he can argue that religion offers us something distinctive he needs to be sure that the contribution religion makes is an advance on the contribution culture generally makes. For no-one can ignore the phenomenal impact that art, expressed as culture has upon our awareness of the power of form. The growth of the media has no doubt been the most important source of this evidence. That modernity has also become acutely aware of the power of media is also the case, and leads therefore to the claim that art, expressed as culture, is as equally conscious of form as religion is claimed to be. Consequently, the real question seems to be as Tillich asked at the beginning of this chapter "What does religion have that art doesn't?" In the final analysis I am

not clear that Tracy has an answer to this question.

It is my claim that religion *does* offer something to ethics that art does not, and that what it offers should be understood as a depth of commitment that few artists can aspire to, and that the moral life cannot function without. Anna Pavlova was said to have suffered for her art, and Van Gogh became insane and killed himself, but these are really poor parallels beside the New Testament picture of "one who gave his life that we might live" ; the Mahayanan Buddhist picture of the bodhisattva, as one who deliberately delays his own salvation, thinking, "I shall become the saviour of all beings, and set them free from their sufferings."[77] Even the Hindu understanding of Krisna, and the doctrine of the *avatara* is illustrative of a depth of commitment that goes beyond what is normally associated with art.[78]

My criticism of Ricoeur at the end of Chapter Four was to question whether an understanding of theological truth, as the imagined possibility of self-authentic, risked the importance of morality for some individual, fictional ideal. The language used there was deliberately strong to emphasise what was at stake. Has Tracy confirmed my fears or not? In many ways, yes. Davis's criticisms do

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[77] See *Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita* 22:402-3 quoted in *The Buddhist Tradition in India, China and Japan* (New York, Vintage Books, 1972), ed. William Theodore de Bary pp.81-82. The doctrine of salvation that is found in the way of the boddhisatva is a challenge to the usual understanding of Buddhism as a way of personal and individualistic enlightenment.

[78] See Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas,* Volume 2, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982), p.239.

expose a weakness in revisionist approaches like Tracy's. I would suggest that the central problem with Tracy's model, is the role the aesthetic occupies as a public sphere. We have seen how useful the publicness of art is for Tracy's aims. Pluralism, truth, integrity and conversation can all be held under one roof because art is public. What is wrong with this according to my thesis are two things. First, as we have seen with Davis's criticisms, there is strong reason to suggest that in defending the publicness of the aesthetic sphere, Tracy reneges on a commitment to the publicness of the *moral* sphere. This is, of course, an inversion of Kierkegaard's story of authenticity where the moral sphere operates at a public level, but the aesthetic and spiritual operate at the level of the individual.[79] Thus, the second flaw with Tracy's paradigm for theological truth and possibly the real criticism of it, is that in his model spirituality becomes reduced to the capacity for aestheticism. Consequently, with such a reduction how can an imagined possibility of self-authenticity offer us resources to cope with those moments of suffering that transcend the comforting powers of the image. How can Tracy make sense of despair? In the Conclusion to this thesis I will expand upon this criticism of Tracy's theological model.

Conclusion

In this Chapter we have explored the strengths and weaknesses of Tracy's model

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[79] See Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, tr. D F. Swenson and W Lowrie, p.119.

of a theological truth claim in some detail. We have seen how the publicness that Tracy seeks for an adequate resolution to the problems of pluralism and theological method are resolved for him in the centrality of art. This is both the great source of hope in Tracy's approach, and its most significant Achilles heel because we have seen that the imagined possibility of self-authenticity that theological truth offers, may in the end fail to deliver the kind of transformation of the human situation that is needed. Is art therefore the most public of human spheres as Tracy claims? Furthermore, in following Ricoeur in suggesting that theological truth claims are representative of the imagined possibility of self-authenticity, is Tracy capable of distinguishing between theological truth claims that are expressions of faith, and are thereby legitimate, and those that are expressions of fear or superstition, and are thereby illegitimate? If not, then the net result of this failing would be that Tracy's model leaves us unable to distinguish between holiness and fanaticism! With such a crucial weakness, I believe that Tracy's understanding of theological truth errs uncomfortably on the side of metaphysics to the *detriment* of morals. If we were to suppose a present-day scenario involving a religious believer sacrificing a child, would Tracy be able to offer a distinctively theological reason, for calling such behaviour fanatical instead of holy? I would argue not.

That this is a serious weakness in Tracy's type of revisionist theology will be stressed further in the final Chapter, where we explore an alternative revisionist model of theological truth in which imagined possibility is less dependent upon

art as an adequate bridge between metaphysics and morals. I shall argue that with this alternative model the imagined possibility of *goodness* promises a better balance between metaphysics and morals than the imagined possibility of self-authenticity.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ON THEOLOGICAL TRUTH AS THE IMAGINED POSSIBILITY OF GOODNESS

"Whatever is great in the sphere of the universally human must therefore not be communicated as a subject for admiration but as an ethical requirement. In the form of a possibility it becomes a requirement.... the good should be presented in the form of a possibility."   Soren Kierkegaard[1]

Introduction

In the previous two Chapters I have explored in some detail the strengths and weaknesses of attempts to understand theological truth as the imagined possibility of self-authenticity. My conclusions, though not wholly negative, are critical. There is a real risk that in understanding theological truth claims in this way, the capacity to judge *between* imagined possibilities is lost. I have claimed that it is necessary to distinguish between different types of imagined possibility. To fail to do so, as I claim Ricoeur and Tracy do, is to dissolve the distinction between the truth claims of religion and the truth claims of art. To maintain the distinctiveness of a theological truth claim, a way must therefore be found that can distinguish between imagined possibilities that merely enhance the human situation, and imagined possibilities that directly influence the transformation of the human situation. In this final Chapter, I propose that the beginnings of such a way can be found in the centralisation of the imagined possibility of *goodness*

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[1] Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1941), tr. D F. Swenson and W Lowrie, pp.320-1.

in theological criteria. By focusing upon the imagined possibility of goodness, we are at least making sure that a critical theological principle exists to judge between legitimate and illegitimate theological truth claims. We are ensuring that a distinction can be made between holiness and fanaticism.

In order that this thesis does not simply conclude with a negative critique of the failings of one type of revisionist theology, this final Chapter therefore intends to offer an alternative revisionist model of theological truth. To an extent it presents Stewart Sutherland's understanding of a theological truth claim as the solution we have been working towards. In contrast to Tracy, for Sutherland a theological truth claim represents the possibility of an alternative way of life, lived in the light of eternity. Whereas Tracy's approach flounders upon the failure to sufficiently distinguish between types of imagined possibility, Sutherland's in contrast, by focusing the critical principle of a theological truth claim on moral criteria, i.e., a good life, may escape the criticisms made of Tracy's approach.

We open the Chapter by examining Sutherland's brand of revisionism and explore how his views on both Christology and theism reflect the criteriological primacy of the possibility of goodness.[2] Next, we discuss Iris Murdoch and Don

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[2] In this chapter I shall be concentrating upon Sutherland's theological contribution as found in *God, Jesus and Belief* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1984). Sutherland's other works include *Atheism and the Rejection of God: Contemporary Philosophy and the Brothers Karamazov* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1977) in which he carries out an extended analysis of Dostoyevsky to show how philosophy and literature relate to each other; and *Faith and Ambiguity* (London, SCM Press

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Cupitt as foils for understanding what is specific about Sutherland's own views. Finally, I reiterate my suggestion that Sutherland's model of a theological truth claim might accord better than Tracy's with *phronesis* understandings of reason, *praxis* models of truth and virtue epistemology.

1. On Sutherland as a Revisionist Theologian

Stewart Sutherland's revisionist ideas are most clearly presented in *God, Jesus and Belief* and argue that what religion might still add to ethics is the possibility of a life lived *sub specie aeternitatis* in the light of eternity.[3] For Sutherland this life is a life of holiness. Sutherland's claim is that theological talk about God is not in the first instance talk about the reality or otherwise of the object, source or foundation of theological truth, but is first of all *talk about a possible way of life*. It is his suggestion that this, in the final analysis is what religion offers us - a disclosure of the possibility of a way of life that is truly moral. What theology does is articulate the possibility of such a life. Sutherland's suggestion that the role of theology is to articulate such a possibility has a close parallel with Davidovich and Kant. The perspective *sub specie aeternitatis* which makes the holy life possible is, for Sutherland, a perspective which is "regulative in nature", and "approached only indirectly through the light which it throws on our

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Ltd., 1984), in which five thinkers who all attempt to inhabit the middle-ground between belief and unbelief are discussed.

[3] See Stewart R. Sutherland, *God, Jesus and Belief* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1984).

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world".[4] At the outset, therefore, Sutherland's suggestions would seem to tie in with the claims made about theological truth in Chapter Four. Nevertheless, as we shall see, there are significant aspects of Sutherland's revisionism that relate him more closely to an Aristotelian moral philosophy than to a Kantian moral philosophy, for Sutherland considers the ultimate criterion of theological truth to be virtue.[5] Sutherland's understanding of a theological truth claim therefore promises to accord more with the *phronesis* understandings of rationality and *praxis* understandings of truth which we explored in Chapter Three, than Tracy's does.[6]

Like Tracy, Sutherland follows a revisionist route for the reinterpretation of Christianity and the development of theological truth claims in today's world. Although there are differences between how the two define revisionist there are also broad similarities. The criteria shown below, by which Sutherland suggests any proposed system of belief can be judged, presents for us a good picture of his model of revisionism.[7]

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[4] Ibid., p.111.

[5] See Stewart Sutherland, *Faith and Ambiguity*, pp.1-27, on Dostoevsky's treatment of the problem of the representation of perfect goodness in literature.

[6] In an interview with Stewart Sutherland (13/3/98) to discuss his theological model, when asked what prevented theological truth claims being reduced to a Kantian conception of Duty, he responded by suggesting that the primacy of the moral need not been seen as a 'reduction' of anything; and that secondly, 'Duty' could be conceived of in a much richer fashion. When asked what the critical theological principle ought to be, he rejected both the imagination and history as candidates and suggested it be actions conducive towards human flourishing.

[7] Stewart Sutherland, *God, Jesus and Belief*, pp.15-18.

1. Any successful revision of the content of religious belief must be undertaken in the context of European culture as a whole.

2. A religious belief which runs counter to our moral beliefs is to that extent unacceptable.

3. The acceptability of a form of religious belief is related to its comprehensiveness in the sense which it makes of our experience of the world in which we find ourselves.

4. A revisionary account of religious belief both commends itself and avoids the dangers of reductionism to the extent to which it gives or preserves insights which are not available elsewhere, into the human condition, or into the world in which we live.

5. A revisionary account of religious belief is acceptable to the extent to which it makes and defends a claim to be true.

The importance of theological truth claims, is seen in the last of Sutherland's criteria. Although the differences between Tracy and Sutherland can be pushed too far, with Tracy perhaps agreeing to most of Sutherland's criteria, where Sutherland differs from Tracy is in the importance of the second of his criteria. For Sutherland, the truth of religion (and hence a theological truth claim), is directly proportionate to its moral efficacy.

> "A religious belief which runs counter to our moral beliefs is to that extent unacceptable."[8]

It is not the case that Sutherland's ideas can be reduced to moral philosophy. His position is rightly thought of as a theological one because God still has a place in it as that which prevents us believing that goodness is a possession. For Sutherland, the possibility of goodness comes from outside us, as a graced gift. Nevertheless, it is my claim that in the final analysis the Good is a more important notion for Sutherland than God, and that virtue is that which is

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[8] Ibid., p.16.

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ultimately characteristic of theological truth. This is evidenced in Sutherland's Christology, where the way that he deals with the figure of Jesus reflects the priority of virtue.

Sutherland's revisionist account of the figure of Jesus corresponds with the broad criteria for revisionist theology given by Buckley and outlined in the Introduction to this thesis.[9] His doctrine of Christ is particularly influenced by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for whom the historical figure of Jesus Christ was of central importance,

> "In Christology one looks at the whole historical man Jesus and says of him
> 'He is God'. One does not first look at a human nature and then beyond to a
> divine nature. One meets the man Jesus Christ, who is fully God".[10]

At the risk of minimising the importance of the historical Jesus (a criticism he takes seriously and deals with extensively over several Chapters in *God, Jesus and Belief*), Sutherland presents the historical Jesus as being less important than the *ideal of goodness* that he points us towards. What Jesus offers us in Sutherland's revisionist schema, is a "demand from without", that gives, "an eternal perspective to all that we in our human way might think morally appropriate."[11] Jesus does not however give us a Platonic transcendent standard by which we can evaluate our own moral values, for as we shall see, this is

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[9] See the Introduction to this thesis.

[10] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, (New York, Collins, 1966), p.8.

[11] Ibid., p.120.

precisely what Sutherland rejects in Iris Murdoch. For Sutherland, Jesus reveals something of the manner of the manifestation of perfect goodness as *particularity*. What Jesus reveals is that,

> "the form of goodness is particular rather than general and that it is to be found embedded in a human being."[12]

The possibility of such incarnate goodness, is then, what Christianity stands for, and as we shall see, the emphasis upon the manifestation of goodness in particular form rather than in general form inclines Sutherland towards an Aristotelian conception of goodness.

Sutherland's commitment to the primacy of virtue is seen again in the light of his revisionary account of theism. Sutherland wants to hold onto theism as the central legacy of Western religion without necessitating a commitment to the premises of theism itself.[13] In Chapter Two of *God, Jesus and Belief* Sutherland explicitly gives a central place to moral considerations in the construction of a theology, asserting the priority of the *moral* attributes of God over all others.[14] Here, the reasons for the rejection of traditional theism are explored in the light of the problem of theodicy. If we choose the problem of suffering and evil, as Sutherland believes we must, as a starting point for theology then - argues

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[12] Ibid., p.191.

[13] Sutherland is influenced by R W. Hepburn in arguing that by abandoning all talk of God we also abandon the things which the concept helps us make sense of. See R.W Hepburn's, *Christianity and Paradox*, (London, Watts, 1958), p.21.

[14] See Stewart Sutherland, *God, Jesus and Belief,* pp.18-35.

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Sutherland - a considerable degree of agnosticism about God's existence must be the result.[15] Consequently, the lasting value of theism and theistic talk about God, can only be seen in terms of statements about the possibility of an alternative life, lived *sub specie aeternitatis,* in the light of eternity. Theological truth claims are therefore not to be thought of as claims about an existing object, source or foundation, that act as a metaphysical guarantor, but as claims about a *possible way of life*, a life of goodness.

Sutherland believes that the fundamental problem facing us today is the question of how to formulate a way of thinking which is adequate to, and correlates with, that way of life.[16] Distinctively theological language, which for him means theistic language, adds to moral language,

> "a possible way of understanding oneself and one's place in the world in which
> one lives", and "a correlated way of living in that world"[17]

Theological language therefore presents a *possible* way of life which incorporates a way of thinking that is not at odds with itself. For Sutherland, it offers something distinctive, notably a view of oneself and the world (an

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[15] See articles by Isobel Woollaston, "Starting All Over Again: The Criteria for a Christian Response to the Holocaust", *Theology* 93: (1990), pp.456-462; Beverley Clack, "Stewart Sutherland and Belief in God", *Theology* 99: (1996), pp.290-295; Richard Harries, "Stewart Sutherland on Suffering" and "A Reply to Richard Harries by Stewart Sutherland", *Theology* 91: (1986), pp.308-317; and A. Phillips-Griffiths, "Certain Hope" *Religious Studies* 26: (1990), pp.453-461.

[16] See Sutherland, *God, Jesus and Belief,* p.73.

[17] Ibid., p.87.

epistemology), but also a view of a way of living in the world (a praxis). Such a view can be described as *sub specie aeternitatis*, and extends (mere) possibility into the realm of actual or realised possibility. Theological language, in particular the language of theism, extends to us the possibility of such a life lived *sub specie aeternitatis*, and therefore a way of thinking adequate to the task of living. What this means for Sutherland is that the kind of truth theological truth deals with must be of a type that cannot be separated from the life in which it is experienced. The view *sub specie aeternitatis* is a whole way of looking at the whole, and is in that sense a regulative notion. Admitting to the frustration that such an understanding can lead to, Sutherland says,

> "We are at best pilgrims who are aware of the possibility of a view sub specie aeternitatis, but for whom this is a regulative or formal notion which informs all our thinking without itself being an idea whose content can be separately elaborated."[18]

This possible way life is, for Sutherland, intricately tied to the "plain fact of suffering". The problem of innocent suffering dominates Sutherland's work and is, in his view, the stumbling block for most modern theology,[19]

> "most modern theologies bring with them a measure of light; What they fail to do in most cases is to shed light into the darkest of corners of human life".[20]

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[18] Ibid., p.114.

[19] Woollaston shows how the problem of innocent suffering relates in Sutherland's work to the thoughts on the Holocaust held by Elie Wiesel and concludes that for both of them, the impossibility of an appeal to theodicy is paramount. See, Isobel Woollaston, "Starting All Over Again: The Criteria for a Christian Response to the Holocaust" in *Theology* 93: (1990), pp.456-462, pp.460f.

[20] Stewart Sutherland, "A Reply to Richard Harries" in *Theology* 91: p.318.

Consequently, the only kind of theological statements that are compatible with a theological foundation in the plain fact of suffering are highly provisional,

> "a theology which starts from the realities of suffering and evil in the world cannot avoid a high degree of agnosticism in its affirmations about God"[21]

While Sutherland admits that such a starting point for theology can seem "unduly negative", in a reply to an article by Richard Harries criticising him on this issue, Sutherland points out that if we accept that any religious beliefs which run counter to our moral beliefs are unacceptable then we are immediately faced with the problem of innocent suffering.[22] Nevertheless, in the risky task of establishing the foundation which enables religion to add anything to ethics at all the primacy of the moral must always be paramount,

> "sometimes theological speculation or special pleading would tempt us to engage in such perilous activity. My point is that we should refuse to allow moral convictions to be overruled by appeals to "higher ways" which are, we are sometimes told, God's ways"[23]

2. On What Religion Adds to Ethics for Sutherland

To illustrate his central claim in *God, Jesus and Belief*, Sutherland uses a line from Robert Bolt's play, *A Man for All Seasons*, in which Thomas More offers guidance to Rich, an unconvinced courtier, that in becoming a teacher and teaching well, "he will know it, his pupils will know it and God will know it".

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[21] Ibid., p.129.

[22] Ibid., p.309, where Harries argues for the basic trustworthiness of existence.

[23] Ibid., p.319.

The key question that Sutherland asks is,

> "What is the difference between the man who adds, and means it, 'and God will know it' and a man who intentionally restricts himself to 'You will know it and your pupils will know it'? [24]

Sutherland's answer to the question is to suggest that what we would lose, if we abandoned theology and all talk of God, is a perspective upon human affairs which extends our horizons beyond *both* the particularism of our own narrow vision *and* even the particularism of all human perspectives.

> "There are two jewels which lie at the heart of the possibility of a view sub specie aeternitatis. The first defines the hope and indeed the belief, that there is an understanding of the affairs of men which is not relative to the outlook of any individual community or age. The second, which crowns that, is the implication that such a view is not even relative to the outlook of mankind." [25]

According to Sutherland, if all talk of God were abandoned we would begin to believe that the life lived *sub specie aeternitatis* was something that was a human construction. But this can never be the case. For Sutherland, the possibility of such a life is only real because the universe is such that it *makes sense* to live a life of holiness. What this amounts to, is the belief that *goodness comes from outside us* as a graced gift.

Iris Murdoch has of course argued that "the most evident bridge between religion and morality is the idea of virtue", and it is therefore pertinent to ask whether

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[24] Ibid., p.83.

[25] Ibid., p.88.

Sutherland is basically saying the same thing or not.[26] What does the vocabulary of religion *add* to the concept of virtue that makes an alternative and holy way of life possible? Would the same not be achieved by replacing the word 'God' with the word 'Good'? What after all does the difference of one 'o' make? "Is God a pretence for seeing certain moral fruits"?, asks Beverley Clack, even suggesting that there might be something disingenuous in Sutherland's thought.[27]

For Sutherland God is clearly not a pretence, belief in God is a much more serious affair, and is expressive of the fact that a holy/moral life is neither a pointless exercise nor an impossibility. If the possibility of living a life of holiness was not real and if the structure of the universe was not such that it made sense to live morally, then the life of holiness would *not* be possible. But for Sutherland the possibility is real. The universe is such that it does make sense to live a holy life. What then distinguishes Sutherland's view from that of Iris Murdoch's?[28] After all Murdoch appears to share many of Sutherland's

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[26] Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1992), p.481.

[27] See Beverley Clack, "Stewart Sutherland and Belief in God" in *Theology* 99 (1996), pp.290-295, p.292.

[28] On a different track altogether but nonetheless interesting Stanley Hauerwas asks in a recent article, "Murdochian Muddles: Can We Get Through Them if God Does Not Exist?" See, Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker, ed. *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Goodness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp.190-208.

concerns, and has even been described as a revisionist theologian![29]

Central to Murdoch's work also is her belief in the sovereignty of the Good, and like Sutherland she holds to a basic correlation between theism and the representation of the possibility of virtue (albeit as a historical phenomenon).

> "Neo-Platonic thinkers made the identification of the Good with God possible; and the Judeo-Christian tradition has made it easy and natural for us to gather together the aesthetic and consoling impression of Good as a person."[30]

Furthermore like Sutherland, for Murdoch,

> "God was (or is) a single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessary real object of attention".[31]

Consequently, central to Murdoch's concerns is the belief that,

> "moral philosophy should attempt to retain a concept which has all these characteristics".[32]

Such a description of God, and of a moral philosophy, therefore exposes significant parallels between Murdoch and Sutherland. Sutherland admits that there is much in Iris Murdoch that he agrees with, nevertheless he distinguishes his own position from Murdoch's. What Murdoch does (wrongly according to

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[29] See Caroline Guerin's article, "Iris Murdoch - A Revisionist Theology? A Comparative Study of Iris Murdoch's *Nuns and Soldiers* and Sara Maitland's *Virgin Territory"* in *Journal of Literature and Theology* 6:2 (1992), pp.153-170. Also, see Mario Antonaccio's "Imagining the Good: Iris Murdoch's Godless Theology", *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1996), pp.223-242, pp.225ff, in which Antonaccio argues for Murdoch's continuing significance in the field of religious ethics.

[30] Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good* (London, Routledge, 1970), p.38.

[31] Ibid., p.55.

[32] Ibid., p.55.

Sutherland), in her identification of the Good with Platonic Forms, is connect the ideas of *transcendence* and *particularity* together, and to do this is to militate against all that Sutherland holds to be most problematic with traditional theism.[33] According to Sutherland, Murdoch wants to make the Good *an object of attention,* and by so doing commits the exact error that she criticises the Judeo-Christian tradition for making with respect to God, thus making the Good, in some sense also, too much like a possession.[34] Thus Sutherland's rejection is emphatic,

> "The reasons for rejecting this view are parallel to my reasons for rejecting the view of God as an individual."[35]

What is at the heart of Sutherland's criticism of Murdoch seems to be a fear of an overly pragmatic account of a transcendent Good,

> "the justification for retaining the idea of a transcendent Good must lie not in what it does, but in the vision to which it gives rise. If the relationship between transcendent Good and vision is contingent, then why retain the idea as more or less than the occasion of insight?"[36]

However, in relating his criticisms of Murdoch back to the account of Thomas More and Rich, and how Rich might profit from his life, Sutherland says,

> "what is required is not to attend to such a transcendent object as the "Good", but to attend to the needs of others and the character of his own ambition".[37]

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[33] See Stewart Sutherland, *God, Jesus and Belief,* Chapter 4.

[34] Sutherland says Murdoch is too influenced by Simone Weil, who he devotes a Chapter to in *Faith and Ambiguity* (London, SCM Press Ltd, 1984), pp.76ff.

[35] Stewart Sutherland, *God, Jesus and Belief,* p.96.

[36] Ibid., p.96.

[37] Ibid,. p.99.

How can this apparent discrepancy be explained?[38] What seems most distinctive about Sutherland's view is the need to resist at all costs the reification of an imagined transcendent Good to which one can appeal for support in the moral life. Yet at the same time "the justification for retaining the idea of a transcendent Good must lie not in what it does, but in the vision to which it gives rise." Sutherland seems to want to resist Murdoch's suggestion that the idea of a transcendent Good itself generates virtue. It is through attention to the needs of the *other* that the holy life is made possible. Not, therefore, through attention to a transcendent Good, but to a lived, particular, good.[39] If my reading of Sutherland is correct on this point this may well mean that for Sutherland the critical principle of a theological truth claim is consequently less to do with the creative imagination, than it is to do with actions that are conducive towards particular, lived goods, i.e., human flourishing.[40]

This picture of Stewart Sutherland raises the question of theological realism.

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[38] It has to be said that there is some confusion in Sutherland's argument at the end of Chapter 6 of *God, Jesus and Belief.* Sutherland himself seems aware of this fact. See p.98.

[39] What Sutherland claims is that religion doesn't so much add anything to ethics, in the way ethics is conceived by Murdoch, rather it is the case that moral philosophy fails to make the holy life as possible as it could be.

[40] The primacy of the moral, and of the concept of the Good in understanding theological truth claims, is evident in Sutherland. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which the goodness that theological truths both represent and make possible, is always slightly out of our reach. The mention of 'vision' is significant, and leads to the suggestion that what might further distinguish Sutherland's position from Murdoch's is *eschatology*. In conversation with Stewart Sutherland (13/3/98) he accepted this analysis of his position and suggested that possibilities must always maintain an unresolved future dimension that makes goodness a reality, and stated that for him, "the ideal can never be instantiated in space and time".

Does an understanding of a theological truth claim in terms of the possibility of goodness, necessitate realism, or does it slide into anti-realism? In Peter Vardy's book *The Puzzle of God*, Sutherland is described as a special kind of realist - a realist about possibilities.[41] But how far away *is* Sutherland's kind of realism from Cupitt's?[42] For Cupitt also, the language of religion can be a spur for the good life. Why then is Sutherland's a more adequate theological construction than Cupitt's? To make sense of why Vardy classes Sutherland as a realist we first need to see how he defines correspondence and coherence theories of truth. For Vardy, a realist is,

> "someone who holds a correspondence theory of truth i.e. that a statement is true if it corresponds to a state of affairs which is independent of language and of the society in which we live."[43]

An anti-realist on the other hand is,

> "someone who holds a coherence theory of truth ie. a statement is true if it coheres with other true statements."[44]

Cupitt believes that the possibility of a holy life is real *whether or not* it corresponds to the way the universe actually is. For him, 'God-talk' is an entirely human affair, it neither tells us something about the way things really are nor depends upon the way things really are for its viability. Reality is what

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[41] Peter Vardy, *The Puzzle of God* (London, Harper Collins, 1990), p.51.

[42] The literature on metaphysical realism is extensive and difficult to say the least, however, I have found Hilary Putnam's lucid treatment of the issues involved in his book *Realism with a Human Face* to be a good guide through the territory.

[43] Ibid., p.16.

[44] Ibid., p.17.

we *describe* it to be like,

> "the surface play of phenomena - words, signs, meanings, appearances - is reality."[45]

Although Cupitt would prefer the less pejorative term *non*-realist to anti-realist, and no doubt would question Vardy's definition of anti-realism, he would also reject the kind of realism Vardy describes.[46] According to Vardy, Sutherland is a realist because he believes that the possibility of a view *sub specie aeternitatis* actually corresponds to the way the universe is,

> "because [he] claims that the truth of Christian language depends on the universe being such that it makes sense to live a life of holiness"[47]

Vardy is accurate here, for Sutherland the universe just simply *is* the kind of place where it makes sense to live a life of holiness.[48] Unlike the deconstructionists and their theological counterparts, the apparent contradictions

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[45] Don Cupitt, *The Long-Legged Fly* (London, SCM Press, 1987), p.20.

[46] Cupitt's version of realism is one that many theologians do not accept. As Rowan Williams says speaking of his own work, "If 'realism' is exactly what Cupitt suggests it is, a good many traditional theologians might find themselves uneasy with it. I don't think that anything I have written, for instance, would commit me to the belief that all theological statements accurately depict some state of affairs in another world, that God can be established as an 'objective' entity by neutral inquiry, that morality and spirituality are calculated to earn everlasting repayment..... Realism is in that sense an Aunt Sally." See, Rowan Williams, "Religious Realism": on not quite Agreeing with Don Cupitt" in *Modern Theology* 1:1, (1984), pp.3-24, p.18.

[47] Peter Vardy, *The Puzzle of God*, p.58.

[48] In the light of Sutherland's explicit commendation of agnosticism as a respectable theological stance - see for example *God, Jesus and Belief*, Chapter 4 - it might be better to locate Sutherland as a critical realist, for whom the existence (or otherwise) of God, is of consequence, only insofar as it bears upon the actual task of living. If he is a realist about anything, Sutherland's realism is a *moral* realism, though as we shall see Vardy prefers to say he is a realist about possibility.

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of life do not present any insuperable difficulties since, "disagreement presupposes rather than excludes the idea of truth".[49] Again like Tracy, this enables Sutherland to maintain a meaningful commitment to the idea that theology still trades in truth claims without being forced into this quandary of showing how theological truth evades the charge of totalisation. For Sutherland, the kind of truth that theology represents is to do with a way of life. Thus, he affirms Vardy's analysis of his own position as a realist one,

> "I accept the need to see the centrality of the belief that the world can be viewed sub specie aeternitatis, is a claim about the world and not a claim about the attitudes which men and women may adopt to the world."[50]

Even more explicitly, in the Chapter in *God, Jesus and Belief,* on "Theology: The Articulation of The Possible", Sutherland himself says,

> "In the proposed scheme what is being offered is a form of theological realism."[51]

Nevertheless, what Sutherland's theological realism seems to be realist *about*, is not the existence of God, but about the *possibility of goodness*.[52] Cupitt of course might also say he was a realist about the possibility of goodness, but Cupitt's possibility is the possibility of a state of affairs wherein the self is finally *extinguished*. The possibility of goodness for Sutherland however, is the possibility of a state wherein the self is in a relation of mutual respect with the

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[49] Ibid., p.4.

[50] Ibid., p.209.

[51] Ibid., p.81.

[52] See Peter Vardy, *The Puzzle of God,* p.57.

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other.[53] Sutherland deals briefly with Cupitt in *God, Jesus and Belief*, and suggests that Cupitt's attempt to formulate a way of thinking adequate to the task of living is to combine,

> "a projectionist theory about what the meaning of statements about God amount to", [with] "a strongly existentialist theory which equates belief in God with a particular form of self-development or self-realisation."[54]

What Sutherland believes his position retains which Cupitt's does not, is a space for the self, which is at the same time resistant to the tendencies of totalisation[55].

3. On the Imagined Possibility of Goodness

Sutherland himself highlights where the flaw might lie in his argument. To refute his claim (that talk of God is talk of the possibility of a view of things *sub specie aeternitatis*) two arguments can be used. The first suggests that any notion of a view of things in the light of eternity is simply unintelligible. The second suggests that the view *sub specie aeternitatis* is in fact not a view in the light of eternity but an anthropomorphic view from a human perspective. Sutherland's claim is that the possibility of a view *sub specie aeternitatis*, held out in theological language, must be understood in terms of its intelligibility.[56] This

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[53] See Stewart Sutherland, *God, Jesus and Belief*, p.160 for the significance of Christ with respect to the self.

[54] Ibid., p.75.

[55] Significantly, Iris Murdoch makes similar criticisms of Cupitt an says his is a "ruthlessly radical position". See *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, p.452.

[56] Ibid,. p.90.

is where the contribution of the legacy of theism can be made, because theological language makes the possibility of a view *sub specie aeternitatis* real by making it intelligible, and by raising awareness of a possible way of life in which an individual's thoughts and actions correlate with the whole of reality.

Sutherland's allusion to the story of Franz Jaggerstatter in his early article, "What Happens After Death", is instructive on this point.[57] In the article, Sutherland asks the question "Is there a possible significance or point to human life which is not at the beck and call of contingencies?", and further "What sort of life would give expression to, or show such significance?" He illustrates his answer with reference to the story of Franz Jaggerstatter. Franz Jaggerstatter was an Austrian peasant who was beheaded for refusing both to pay taxes to the Nazi regime, and to comply with conscription. His apparently reckless martyrdom seemed to serve no good cause, his friends and family would suffer as a result and his stubbornness would not lead to the overnight downfall of the Nazis. Sutherland consequently asks "What good came of it?" His answer, is to say that we cannot ultimately judge the worth of Jaggerstatter's sacrifice according to its consequences.

Jaggerstatter's story is meant to show us that certain ethical principles can transcend even the fear of our own death, and furthermore that the *significance*

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[57] Stewart Sutherland, "What Happens After Death" in *Scottish Journal of Theology* Vol 22 (1969), pp.404-418, p.414.

of an action in the light of these principles cannot be evaluated simply in terms of their immediate consequences. It is in this sense that the story of Franz Jaggerstatter's heroism is meant to show us how a life of goodness is possible, and what constitutes such a life. To see that sometimes what a person does can go *beyond* our powers of explanation, is to illustrate the possibility of a life lived 'free from the beck and call of all contingencies'. Sutherland argues that to consider that such a life *is* possible, is to show that there *is* a possible point to human life which is not at the beck and call of contingencies. Jaggerstatter's life showed such a thing.

There is, of course, a sense in which Sutherland has not said very much about the *essence* of the good life. Sutherland is rightly shy of defining what he calls the "content" of a view *sub specie aeternitatis*. To do so would surely risk a form of totalisation more oppressive than the one he struggles to evade. Nevertheless, at the same time such shyness runs the risk of incapacitating any meaningful criticism of claims to goodness. Unless we offer some guidelines about what a life lived *sub specie aeternitatis* might look like, then how can we possibly argue that the mild-mannered and moderate Anglican way, for example, is any better than the more extrovert (and misleading) interpretations of the good life, held by groups like the Heaven's Gate cult?[58] Consequently, the question

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[58] The Heaven's Gate cult was a group of Californians who thought that the tail of Hale Bop comet contained a space ship waiting for them once they had killed themselves. Their mass suicide revealed the fact that they had carefully and conscientiously planned their own demise in the full expectation that their beliefs about an after-life would be fulfilled.

of which critical principle we can apply to adjudicate between rival interpretations of what the life lived *sub specie aeternitatis* might be, looms up before us. How can we judge between the saint whose life is lived sincerely *sub specie aeternitatis* and sacrificed for a *worthy* cause, and the fanatic whose life is also sincerely lived *sub specie aeternitatis* and yet is sacrificed for an *unworthy* cause? Are we not in the end bound to admit that like Tracy, Sutherland is also without a critical principle for discerning between the saint and the fanatic?

Sutherland's suggestion (which might at least go someway towards the establishment of such a principle), is that what the saint's view of things in the light of eternity has, that the fanatic's doesn't, is a transcendent set of values that enables him/her to be self-critical. For the saint, the view *sub specie aeternitatis* is therefore free of the kind of (false) certainty, that deludes the fanatic into thinking that his/her course of action is the only possible one, and therefore makes possible the kind of self-criticism that is unavailable to the fanatic.[59] On this basis we could also criticise Tracy's model for failing to provide an adequate means of self-criticism to enable the individual to judge between holiness and fanaticism. What makes us able to judge *between* different interpretations of the life of goodness involves the capacity for a perspective

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[59] In his article "Certain Hope", A. Phillips Griffiths points out that for Sutherland uncertainty is the *only* thing that makes hope real. While I cannot see how hope can be a meaningful concept *without* a high degree of uncertainty, Griffiths nonetheless suggests otherwise and challenges Sutherland for making Christian hope sound, "not only paradoxical but downright contradictory.", p.453.

upon things with which we can gain an estimate of our own life. And, as in the case of Jaggerstatter, this adds a significance to our lives that cannot be reduced to the consequences that spring from it.[60] Although I don't think Sutherland gives us a definitive answer to the problem of how to distinguish heroic martyrdom from fanatical martyrdom, I suspect that, at the end of the day, the core of his answer will involve an orientation towards the problem of suffering.[61] However, the suggestion that a transcendent set of values is necessary in order that we can judge between holiness and fanaticism is one that Tracy's model might well benefit from.

That Sutherland believes in the possibility of goodness, and that it makes sense to live a good life is evident. He believes, furthermore, that religion represents that possibility. Today, talk of goodness is easily mocked and sometimes deservedly so when it inclines towards a form of piety that has its back turned on the reality of suffering. Sutherland's optimism must therefore be tested. The "paradigm evil event" of the Holocaust is an extreme test, but one that if passed will render his claims more plausible as a result.[62] In what sense was goodness a real possibility in the Holocaust? Reading a book like Primo Levi's account

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[60] To say that we have a capacity to view things in the light of eternity is not the same as saying such a capacity is our possession, and consequently leaves the door open for some kind of doctrine of grace.

[61] Isabel Woollaston's article, "Starting All Over Again: The Criteria for a Christian Response to the Holocaust" in *Theology* 93 (1990), pp.456-462, suggests that Sutherland might respond to this question in this manner.

[62] See Stephen Davis ed. *Encountering Evil* (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1985), p.6.

of the daily sufferings undergone by those interned in Auschwitz during the Holocaust quickly puts paid to the suggestion that all suffering brings forth goodness. In Levi's reflections we are constantly reminded that evil also begets evil and suffering begets more suffering; that to possess morality in a place like Auschwitz was to create a shortcut to the ovens. Time and again we are reminded by Levi that those who survived the death camps were those that saved every scrap of energy for themselves; altruism in Auschwitz was an evil; that the war of survival raged between victim and victim as well as between victim and persecutor; that to display weakness at all was to be 'selected' for 'special treatment'. "It makes sense to live a life of goodness!" Sutherland's claim seems to have less resonance in the light of Levi's account of the Holocaust. Push Sutherland's claim to the limit and it seems nothing but an empty gesture, a pleasing picture with which to appease our consciences. So is the claim that the kind of goodness Sutherland calls us to only a trite appeasement of our guilt after all? Is the life to which Sutherland calls us an illusion on a par with the possibility of unicorns existing and not a real possibility?

It could be so were it not for the fact that Levi himself refuses to abandon the belief that sustained him throughout his internment, that *all things have purpose*, that somehow,

> "the conviction that life has a purpose is rooted in every fibre of man .. [as] a property of the human substance"[63]

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[63] Primo Levi, *Is This A Man* (Italy 1958), reprinted and translated (London, Penguin, 1979), p.77.

Consequently, we should not ask whether *Sutherland's* claim passes the test of the Holocaust, for it is *reality* that sets us the challenge. In the darkest of places at the darkest of hours, is goodness a real possibility or not? In Primo Levi's ability to see in the events of the Holocaust more than absolute evil we glimpse the possibility of goodness. What Sutherland is certain of is that the pessimism that suggests that a life of goodness is *not* possible, is not merely *possibly* wrong, but is *actually* wrong and fails us as a view of the way things are. To reject the possibility of human goodness is, for Sutherland, to deny that there *is* a distinction between good and evil.[64] It is therefore for this reason that I believe it is justifiable to claim that for Sutherland, the priority of the Good must mean that the critical principle of a theological truth claim is to be thought of in ethical terms as the imagined possibility of goodness. What makes the possibility of goodness real and not merely imagined for Sutherland, is firstly, that such a possibility is more than an empirical one,

> "what is simply empirically possible may or may not be found in the world and therefore is only possibly real"[65]

and secondly that it is a possibility that is at the same time,

> "a claim about the way the world is."[66]

A possibility that is at the same time "a claim about the way the world is", is in

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[64] Ibid,. p.203.

[65] Stewart Sutherland, *God, Jesus and Belief,* p.202.

[66] Ibid,. p.202.

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fact a *vision*. The kind of truth claims that Sutherland's life lived *sub specie aeternitatis* represent, are therefore in the final analysis visionary truths, or imagined possibilities. Iris Murdoch of course also suggests that the imagined possibility of the Good is enough to make the possibility of the good life in principle become a possibility in fact.

> "I attach great importance to the concept of a transcendent good as an idea (properly interpreted) essential to both morality and religion."[67]

The question that both Sutherland and Murdoch face is, therefore, why an imagined possibility of the Good is more capable of genuinely transforming the human situation than any other imagined possibility. As we shall see in the Conclusion to this thesis, what might qualify the Good as an imagined possibility above all other imagined possibilities, is its capacity to halt the play of images that occur in any means of representation. In so doing, the imagined possibility of goodness may indeed be more genuinely transformative than the imagined possibility of self-authenticity.

4. On the Moral Theory Underlying Sutherland's Revisionist Theology

The thrust of Chapters Two and Three of this thesis suggest that an Aristotelian conception of goodness, stressing the role of practice, can best equip a revisionist theology in today's situation. The question can therefore be asked how far the moral theory that underpins Sutherland's revisionist theology concurs with this suggestion.

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[67] Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals,* p.511.

We have already touched on the Platonic element in Sutherland's work in relation to Iris Murdoch. How far is the moral theory underpinning Sutherland's revisionist theology of a Platonic type? The Platonic streak in Sutherland is expressed in the fact that the existence of goodness (at least as a possibility), is an ontological reality. For Sutherland the life of holiness is not relative to human life. The *universe* is such that it makes sense to live a life of holiness. The life lived *sub specie aeternitatis* therefore seems close to the life that Plato recommended, lived in contemplation of the Platonic Form of the Good.[68]

Peter Vardy certainly suggests that Sutherland's ideas have a close affinity to Plato's moral philosophy, and in general terms Vardy is correct in drawing attention to the parallel between Plato and Sutherland.[69] Yet Sutherland seems at pains to disassociate himself from overly Platonic interpretations of his revisionism.

> "The finitude and agnosticism which I have stressed in relation to the idea of God applies also to the idea of the Good".[70]

In contrast to Murdoch, for Sutherland there is *no* transcendent Good which we can reflect upon as an object of attention. Our grasp of the way things are in reality is conditioned by a view of the world *sub specie aeternitatis*.

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[68] See Plato's famous simile of the cave for a description of the implications of the life lived in contemplation of the Good; *The Republic,* Bk. VII, trans. G.M.A Grube (Indianapolis, Hacket, 1974).

[69] See Peter Vardy, *The Puzzle of God,* p.54.

[70] See Sutherland, *God, Jesus and Belief,* p.98.

"There is no technique not even the Platonic, for seeing either from, or into eternity. Likewise to see the world *sub specie aeternitatis* is not to glimpse something called 'the eternal' or 'the transcendent'. The eternal, the transcendent is not a feature or aspect of the world. It is a possibility confined within the structures of the world. It is a possibility that can be recognised ... but its recognition does not presuppose a non-finite viewpoint, nor a non-finite or transcendent object to be discerned or glimpsed."[71]

What therefore seems to keep Sutherland from Murdoch's fully blown Platonism is his refusal to accept that the Good is a transcendent object of attention that exists *in reality*. As already mentioned, the only kind of realism Sutherland will admit to is a realism about the *possibility* of goodness.

In using phrases like "the eternal is a possibility confined within the structures of the world", Sutherland's indebtedness to Kant comes out more strongly than his indebtedness to Plato. (In *God, Jesus and Belief*, he even goes as far as describing the book as a "modest footnote to Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*".[72])

In particular, Sutherland reflects Kant's thinking in his use of the notion of 'regulative principles'.[73] For Sutherland, to achieve a life lived *sub specie aeternitatis* (even in part), an individual must gain a proper appreciation of his/her own values in the light of a set of values of a different and superior kind. Theology articulates the possibility of such a set of values. In its language about

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[71] Ibid., p.102.

[72] Ibid., p.15.

[73] Ibid., p.98f.

God, heaven, hell, sin and redemption, theology fulfils a regulative function in providing a benchmark against which an individual can measure his/her own morality.[74] However, what is also significant for Sutherland is the idea that both moral and religious truth claims are of a 'conversational' nature and permit 'mutual modification'.[75] Though closely linked to Kant's moral philosophy, Sutherland therefore includes an element which is not found in Kant and which is more like an element which is found in Aristotle.[76] It is an element which stresses - in contrast to Plato - the *particularity* of goodness.

Fundamentally, Kant's moral theory centres upon there being a principle upon which moral claims can be founded - the Categorical Imperative. For Aristotle, it is not so clear that such a principle exists. The truth or otherwise, of a moral claim is only worked out in the life lived in expression of it, (here of course we would emphasise Sutherland's appeal to the life *lived sub specie aeternitatis*). For both Aristotle and Kant, what is ultimately good acts in accordance with reason. Yet for Kant such action involves the *conforming* of the human will to the demands of the Categorical Imperative. For Aristotle on the other hand, such action involves the *fulfilling* of the will in happiness and the 'good life'. Consequently, for Kant an action may be good if the will that generates it is

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[74] Ibid., p.15.

[75] Ibid., p.41.

[76] Sutherland declares his independence of Kant in a number of places. See for example *God, Jesus and Belief*, pp.15,16.

focused only on the pursuit of the moral law and the exercise of duty. For Aristotle, such conditions are not sufficient. For Aristotle, an action is only truly good if the person who performs it in pursuit of the exercise of duty derives genuine happiness from doing so.[77]

> "The man who does not rejoice in noble actions is not even good; since no one would call a man just who did not enjoy acting justly, nor any man liberal who did not enjoy liberal actions; similarly in all other cases."[78]

The concept of genuine happiness in Aristotle (*eudaemonia*), parallels Kant to the extent that it is the idea of virtue as *activity in accordance with rational principles*. Yet what makes the distinction between Kant and Aristotle so pointed is Aristotle's insistence that the virtues are acquired through *practice*. For Aristotle, goodness is not merely something intellectual, it involves ingrained dispositions of character that are acquired through habit.[79] There is no instantaneous acquisition of virtue through the pursuit of duty as Kant would see it. Virtue, for Aristotle is a much more complex phenomenon and involves personality, character and relationality. The celebrated 'doctrine of the golden mean', is an expression of the way that moral decisions are reached in practice and is not meant to be a formula for adjudicating *between* moral claims. It is a

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[77] The apparently individualistic nature of this aspect of Aristotle's ethics is offset by his stress upon the social nature of happiness. Not only does happiness have a social dimension but the 'good life' must be taught to us by society.

[78] See *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I:VIII. 1099a16-19.

[79] See *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II:I. 1103a14-b1.
"Ethical virtue comes about by habit hence even its name derives from the word 'ethos', custom or habit."

description of what actually happens when moral decisions are made.[80] For Aristotle - in contrast to Plato - that which is universal is only reached *through* the particular.

To what extent can we therefore see Aristotelian or Kantian moral theory reflected in Sutherland's revisionism? We have already mentioned that for Sutherland, theological language makes the possibility of a life of holiness real by making it *intelligible*. This of course seems to commit him to a typically Kantian framework where religion is allowed scope within the limits of reason alone. Nevertheless, it is arguable that the role reason occupies in Sutherland's thinking is significantly different to that which it occupies in Kant's. To make a life of holiness intelligible for Sutherland, does not seem to be about finding a single principle by which holiness can be judged to be present or absent, but appears to be more about finding an adequate response to the *problem of suffering*. His Christology gives us more indicators in this direction.

For Sutherland it is important that any conception of the nature of Christ does not mislead us into believing that the nature of goodness can be simply 'read off' the life of the person of Jesus. As pointed out earlier, Jesus is for Sutherland a manifestation of human goodness in particularity, an example of what Kierkegaard would call 'an individual', someone who is,

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[80] See John Cottingham, *Western Philosophy: An Anthology*, (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1996), p367.

"a stranger in the world of the finite but (who) does not manifest his separation from worldliness by a foreign mode of dress."[81]

What is *unique* about Jesus is therefore that he manifests a conception of goodness which does not contain any external sign of its own vindication. This is of central importance for Sutherland, and explains the biblical portrait of an *ambiguous* Christ who demands to be recognised as goodness incarnate yet still leaves room for doubt, and thus calls for *optimism*.[82] Consequently, any conception of the historical figure of Jesus is for Sutherland, wrong if it allows an easy progression from, i. Jesus was a good man, to ii. Goodness is a possibility. This is because such an equation risks reducing goodness to the activities of a frozen reason, suspended in time. For Sutherland such an approach,

"distorts the nature of goodness by making it appear as if it were a quality which can be individuated, described and judged unambiguously to be present or absent."[83]

Kant would almost certainly have believed that to judge goodness to be unambiguously present or absent was a prerequisite of any moral philosophy, and in that sense Sutherland therefore seems to stray from the path of Kantian moral philosophy. Nevertheless, in discussing the Euthyphro dilemma - the question posed by Euthyphro in the Platonic dialogue of the same name - both Kantian and Aristotelian themes can be seen to emerge in Sutherland's thinking.

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[81] See Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p.367.

[82] See Sutherland, *God, Jesus and Belief*, p.189.

[83] Ibid., p.193.

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Euthyphro's question asks whether holiness is loved by the Gods because of a quality it (holiness) possesses, or because it is a quality of the gods themselves. Despite his insistence that in general moral claims must take priority over religious claims, Sutherland's response to this question is to argue that the either/or nature of the question does not fully do justice to the nature of the subject matter. In rejecting the idea that knowledge can be built upon sure foundations into a hierarchy of truth claims, or that religious truth can be revealed, Sutherland also rejects the need to answer the Euthyphro dilemma, and does so by employing Kantian distinctions.[84] For example he argues that a distinction needs to be made between the propositions, 1. God always wills the Good; and 2. the God of Christian theology always wills the Good. Since the proposition, 'God always wills the Good' is for Sutherland an analytic proposition, it does not contradict his general principle which asserts the priority of the moral over the religious. It is only the second proposition, 'the God of Christian theology always wills the Good', which is a synthetic proposition and which can therefore be applied to his general rule.[85]

The explicit use of Kantian epistemological categories has a clear purpose. For Sutherland, whereas the second proposition is in principle open to falsification, the first is not. The truth of the proposition 'God wills the Good' is not however

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[84] Ibid., p.37.

[85] Ibid., p.38.

meant to imply the existence of a being called God, but the "ultimate compatibility indeed the interdependence of moral and religious beliefs."[86] What Sutherland hopes to achieve by this claim is a meaningful defence of the idea that religious and moral truth claims exist in "mutually modifying conversation", an idea which he says, "is offensive only to those who believe that they have access to absolute or ultimate truth whether religious or moral."[87] Sutherland stresses that this is not a commitment to moral or religious relativism but merely to the view that all knowledge is only partial.[88] In a manner not dissimilar to David Tracy, Sutherland uses Waismann's notion that certain terms have an "open texture" that facilitates the mutual modification of religious and moral beliefs - thus preventing the reduction of one to the other.[89]

> "Part of the strength of the beliefs of many religious traditions rests on this capacity which some of their central tenets have to be modified and refined to most circumstances and to live in contexts which would have been unimaginable when these ideas first took shape."[90]

Consequently, Sutherland's hope is that the open texture of moral and religious concepts will allow for his general rule that a religious belief that runs counter to a moral belief is unacceptable, yet not entail the *reduction* of religion, or the

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[86] Ibid., p.39.

[87] Ibid., p.41.

[88] Ibid., p.41.

[89] See F. Waismann 'Verifiability' in A. Flew (ed.) *Logic and Language I*, (Oxford, Blackwell, 1951) where he argues that the definitions of empirical concepts must *always* be revisable.

[90] Ibid., p.46.

privileging of moral beliefs over religious.

It seems therefore, that while Sutherland may echo Kant in some areas, his determination to avoid privileging either religious or moral beliefs, and his distrust of foundationalist epistemologies add an element in his moral theory which can be justly described as echoing Aristotelian themes more than Kantian. Furthermore, in ascribing to religious and moral beliefs a capacity for mutual modification Sutherland's work may even in the final analysis be seen to *compliment* David Tracy's, in attempting to create a revisionist account of theological truth claims that sees the distinctiveness of theological truth in terms of its hermeneutical qualities.

The question can of course be asked whether an imagined possibility of goodness can survive the rigours of a postmodernist winter. Can it still make sense to believe with Sutherland, that the possibility of goodness exists beyond our epistemological grapplings for truth; that the hermeneutic flux that permits mutual revision does not necessarily involve limitless extensions into a postmodernist echo chamber? As already stressed, the main force of such a question is only real if we perceive postmodernism to be a complete threat to knowledge and understanding. If the theological community allows itself to be trapped within forms of epistemological foundationalism that refuse to acknowledge any hermeneutical dimension to the processes of knowledge and understanding whatsoever, then postmodernism will indeed present itself as

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nothing other than an unwelcome and irksome trend. If on the other hand we accept that the combined problems of epistemological foundationalism, metaphysical reductionism and linguistic representationalism that were discussed in Chapter One are real enough to call for a careful response, then postmodernism presents itself as an exciting challenge through which the theological community can renew itself.

How then can the imagined possibility of goodness that theological truth claims are expressive of, best survive the corrosive 'acids' of postmodernity? How can the hermeneutic instability that postmodernism propels us towards be arrested in such a way as to *preserve* goodness? A Kantian picture of goodness does not appear to have the resources to withstand attacks upon epistemological foundationalism and will therefore fail to provide an adequate moral philosophy for the understanding of theological truth claims that I have been arguing for. An Aristotelian picture of goodness on the other hand seems to offer more promise. Postmodernism wishes to resist the collapse of all ontologies into static and immoveable entities and encourages fluidity, movement and interaction. Aristotelian ethics perhaps offers a more fruitful interface with many of the key themes of postmodernity than any other. Aristotle's ethics offer the possibility of including areas of life other than those narrowly circumscribed by the pursuit of Kantian duty. Precisely because of this fact they fit better with the type of life of holiness that Sutherland describes by allowing for *both* the intellectual and the relational, and therefore offer a more adequate response to the problem of

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suffering than the Kantian life of duty.[91] As Martha Nussbaum has repeatedly asked, how *can* a Kantian moral philosophy possibly make sense of the human experience of love?[92] Aristotle's moral philosophy is broad enough to include everything of real significance in human life whereas Kant's is not. Consequently, unless a theological description of a life of holiness such as Sutherland's, is content to limit itself to certain specified spheres of human experience, the most versatile moral philosophy it can adopt must surely be Aristotelian. In doing so, the unsettling effects of postmodernism can be offset against the real and lasting benefits of a genuine turn to goodness in philosophical and theological circles.

Conclusion

Part Two of this thesis has made a number of claims. We began by discussing possibility as that which could distinguish theology from philosophy. My starting point was that theology is, as Sutherland expresses it to be, the "articulation of the possible".[93] Through examining the way that Ricoeur links theological truth claims with the imagination, I argued for the need to maintain a distinction

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[91] See Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind*, pp.15-29 on the advantages of virtue based approaches to ethics over act-based or rule-based approaches to ethics in accommodating relational aspects of living.

[92] See Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1986); and *Love's Knowledge*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1990), where Nussbaum argues for a move away from act-based moral theory to a more particularist approach based upon literature as a model of moral reasoning.

[93] See Sutherland, *God, Jesus and Belief*, Chapter 5, "Theology as the Articulation of the Possible."

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between different types of imagined possibility. I claimed that some imagined possibilities, such as the imagined possibility of the existence of mythical creatures, were less likely to effect the transformation of the human situation than others, such as the imagined possibility of goodness, or justice. I therefore questioned whether Ricoeur's suggestion, that theological truth claims represent the imagined possibility of self-authenticity, distinguished sufficiently between different types of imagined possibility. At the end of Chapter Five, I consequently asked what there was in Ricoeur, that would enable us to claim that the imagined possibility of goodness or justice, was of a different and more significant type of imagined possibility. In pursuing the same line of criticism with David Tracy I suggested that in centralising a Ricouerian understanding of imagined possibility, Tracy fails to be able to distinguish between theological truth claims that are expressions of *faith*, and are thereby legitimate, and those that are expressions of *fear* or *superstition*, and are thereby illegitimate. I also suggested that in adhering so closely to the claim that "the truth claims of art and religion stand or fall together", Tracy's theology risks collapsing the distinction between religion and art, and assumes a public scope to the creative imagination, that may not in fact be the case. This exposes major presuppositions in Tracy's reasoning. Tracy's approach insists that the *image*, that which is the product of the creative imagination, facilitates authenticity. But what if this is not the case? What if the imagination actually *distances* us from authenticity? The final Chapter therefore suggests that to centralise the imagined possibility of *goodness* in theology, might escape the weaknesses in Ricoeur and Tracy. Where

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Ricoeur and Tracy seem to be incapable of distinguishing between different types of imagined possibility, Sutherland at least stresses that the imagined possibility of goodness ought to have priority in judging between theological truth claims, and thus provides a way for revisionist theologians to avoid relying too heavily upon the belief that art does not privilege metaphysics above morals. It would be illegitimate of me to claim more than this on the basis of what we have seen. Sutherland's imagined possibility of goodness, is after all an *imagined* possibility that at some point must rely upon some means of representation and therefore upon art. Nevertheless, what I have tried to suggest distinguishes Sutherland's imagined possibility from Tracy's, is the necessity of a *life lived in verification of it*. Without such a life - Sutherland claims - the possibility of goodness *is not real*. To me, this claim makes Sutherland's understanding of theological truth claims, better suited to *phronesis* models of rationality within a virtue epistemology, than Tracy's. Coupled with a *phronesis* model of rationality, within the kind of virtue epistemology exemplified in Chapter Three by Linda Zagzebski, Sutherland's understanding of a theological truth claim, indeed promises to satisfy the demands of both metaphysics and morals.

By focusing theological truth claims on the imagined possibility of goodness, Sutherland does not need to rely upon the creative imagination as the "power of the possible", or art as the one particular that has universal scope for the legitimation of theological truth. Instead, a theological truth is both "theological" and "true" only insofar as it contributes towards goodness. Sutherland's

understanding of the type of imagined possibility that theological truth claims represent thus seems more capable of avoiding the reification of theological truth claims to metaphysics, than Tracy's does.[94]

Part Two of this thesis has therefore been an attempt at theological constructivism. The legitimacy of the exercise was established in Part One. My chosen focus for this theological constructivism centred upon possibility. What I believe I have established in Part Two, is that great care needs to be taken by revisionists in the assumptions they make about art generally. Furthermore, in focusing upon the creative imagination as the "power of the possible"[95] revisionist theologians need to do more work to sufficiently distinguish between different types of imagined possibility, lest they end up unable to distinguish between forms of faith and practice that are conducive to the transformation of the human situation, and forms that are not. In the Conclusion to this thesis I will briefly indicate where I believe that work might best begin.

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[94] What is arguable, is of course whether Sutherland escapes reducing theological truth claims to morals. In my discussion with him, I asked him how he would respond to this question. His response was to suggest that the question of the distinctiveness of theological truth must be framed within an understanding of the relationship between the aesthetic, the moral and the religious, such as that found in Kierkegaard.

[95] Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations,* p.408.

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CONCLUSION

THE IMAGINED POSSIBILITY OF GOODNESS BEYOND THE IMAGE?

"Thou shalt not make for thyself any graven image, or likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath or in the water below; thou shalt not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God." (Exodus 20:4-5 RSV)

"She [wisdom] is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honour. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her". (Proverbs 3:15-18 RSV)

This thesis has been concerned with the nature of a theological truth claim. In particular I have been trying to establish what kind of theological truth claim might allow for the universal comprehensiveness that religion provides, without either reducing itself to a moral imperative, or privileging itself over a moral imperative. I have therefore posed the question as the nature of a theological truth claim between metaphysics and morals. Under this rubric, the comprehensiveness and universality that religion represents has been allied with metaphysics, and the imperative to act virtuously in the face of particularity has been taken to represent morals. My argument has been to suggest that theological truth is best understood as the imagined possibility of goodness.

In Chapter One I initially established the field of reference for the thesis by arguing for the centrality of the notion of revisability in bridging the realms of religion and ethics. There it was shown that a revisable theological truth claim

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necessitated some form of public rationality. The next two Chapters pursued this question in various ways and sought to defend the legitimacy of theological truth in the face of modernity's scepticism towards religion. In these Chapters I examined *praxis* understandings of faith and *phronesis* models of reason, before in Chapter Four outlining a plausible framework of *meaning* for theological truth claims in the light of a Kantian understanding of theological truth as forms of *teleological* judgement. There, it emerged that theological truth could at the very least be conceived of as *symbolic* truth, pregnant with possibility, and that the province of meaning of a theological truth claim was the human imagination.

Part One of the thesis therefore defends the viability of theological truth claims. It argues that modernity is wrong if it suggests that theological truth must either inevitably be reduced to morals, or reified to metaphysics. It is the claim of Part One of the thesis that there is nothing in theological truth *per se* that is suggestive of such inevitability. Likewise it claims that using a model of religion as a province of meaning such as Adina Davidovich's, and following in the spirit of Kant's *Third Critique*, theological truth claims can *involve* moral imperatives without being *reducible* to them. In Part One, I therefore hope to have justified the move into a more constructive theological mode in Part Two. Here, the focus is no longer on the question of *whether* theological truth claims are valid or not, but on the question of the specific nature, and distinctiveness of theological truth. The heart of this question is dealt with in Chapters Five to Seven, where imagined possibility is suggested to be that which is distinctive of theological

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truth. After grounding the question of possibility in the work of Martin Heidegger. I then moved on to explore the promise contained in Paul Ricoeur's notion of the imagined possibility of self-authenticity. There we saw that the *realisation* of possibility is through the exercise of the creative imagination in narrative and metaphor. My criticism of Ricoeur centred on the claim that he failed to adequately distinguish between imagined possibilities that were genuinely transformative, and those that were not. Consequently, I argued that the imagined possibility of self-authenticity might not possess all that was necessary for the transformation of the human situation. The next Chapter dealt with an explicitly theological appropriation of Ricoeur's understanding of the imagined possibility of self-authenticity in the work of David Tracy. There, I showed how Tracy deploys Ricoeur's understanding of imagined possibility in the construction of a fully *hermeneutical* systematic theology. Tracy's model of theological truth was subjected to a detailed analysis and led to the conclusion that, like Ricoeur, Tracy fails to distinguish between different types of imagined possibility, and consequently leaves us unable to determine holiness from fanaticism. Furthermore, in this Chapter I also suggested that Tracy's proposals for theology rely too heavily on the belief that art does not privilege metaphysics above morals. At this point an important aspect of the argument of Part Two becomes apparent. In following Kant's understanding of the aesthetic judgement as found in the Third Critique, Ricoeur and Tracy show us how a theological truth claim can be redeemed from the ghetto it finds itself in. They show us how theology can function as the hermeneutic fabric of conversation, and allow for

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a plurality of voices on a range of subjects. Nevertheless, in placing Ricoeur and Tracy under close examination, it became apparent that art - understood as the creative imagination - may not yield a sufficiently *critical* principle for the adjudication of competing theological truth claims. Art may well allow theological truth to marry the universal scope of its claims with their particular contextual expression, but in so doing does it leave us with adequate criteria by which rival claims can be judged? The premise behind my criticism of Tracy's model was fundamentally that art is too closely tied to metaphysics for it to do justice to morals, and that consequently, the kind of comprehensiveness Tracy's theological truth provides is more liable to assert a privilege *over* morals than be subjugated *under* morals. In plain terms, to refer back to the analogy with the dilemma of Abraham in the sacrifice of Isaac, if, at the moment when Abraham stood with his knife poised to plunge into Isaac's heart, the angel had whispered a Tracyesque theological truth in his ear, then I fear, little would have stayed his hand.

This observation leads me to an important claim of this thesis. The problem with all models of theology that build upon the role of the creative imagination in generating possibility, is that of the projection of an *idealised* truth into a realm *distant from* the actual realm of *existence*. An *imagined* possibility is of course one step away from a real possibility. Imagined possibility may well *contribute* to the realisation of possibility itself, but it does not necessarily make such a possibility real, for the possibilities of existence are - as Kierkegaard knew -

even more immediate than the possibilities of the imagination.[1]

> "there comes a moment in a man's life when his immediacy is, as it were, ripened and the spirit demands a higher form in which it will apprehend itself as spirit."[2]

In essence, my critique of the idea of an imagined possibility of self-authenticity in such a moment, concerns how an imagined possibility of self-authenticity can be distinguished from a *fantasised* or even *deluded* possibility of authenticity. Surely the *attentiveness* demanded of authenticity can brook no conversation with fantasy.[3] The 'void' of the soul that alone might make sense of the experience of human suffering, cannot be contented with the appeasements offered by art. Images must eventually lose their appeal if something as durable as *truth* has to be arrived at.

Why we must move beyond art is, therefore, as Iris Murdoch herself suggests, and Kierkegaard well knew, to do with the tendency for art to *distance* and *cushion* us from reality,

> "Art, which consoles and to which we also return for wisdom, tends to or may seem to, romanticise despair. Innumerable poems, stories, pictures, portray it in ways we are easily able to tolerate and enjoy. Christ on the cross is an image so familiar and beautified that we have difficulty in connecting it with awful human suffering. Grunewald's Christ may make us shudder but we

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[1] See Kierkegaard's description of the creative despair that resides in the 'moment' in *The Sickness Unto Death* tr. H V. and E H. Hong, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980).

[2] Soren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* Vol. 2 (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1941). Tr. D F. and I M. Swenson and W. Lowrie, p.193.

[3] See, Simone Weil *Waiting On God: Letters and Essays,* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), pp.53-60.

admire it as a tour de force."[4]

In fact, for Kierkegaard, it was this cushioning effect of art that created a melancholic sickness that caused the failure "to will deeply and sincerely" amongst his contemporaries, and thus trap them in lives of inauthenticity.[5]

With such a fatal Achilles heel, do we still have the confidence to ground *theological* truth in art? A truth that purports to survive the Holocaust, whose comprehensiveness knows no limits; a truth that promises the purest and highest authenticity; a truth that as the Psalmist says, survives even in Hell?

> "Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?
> Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?
> If I ascend to heaven, thou art there!
> If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!
> (Psalm 139: RSV)

If art merely provides us with "consoling" images can there be an image of suffering - even of one so profound as an innocent suffering Christ - that can approximate to the full emptiness of the fears behind what Simone Weil calls *affliction*, or Kierkegaard calls the *sickness unto death*? An emptiness wherein the darkness that is encountered is that of an apophatic void in which *all* images lose their power? Even in the realm of ordinary experience, the realm where

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[4] Murdoch is very committed to the power of *good* art in helping us realise goodness, nevertheless, not all art is conducive towards goodness, and can reach a point when it ceases to be an ally of goodness. "A great deal of art, perhaps most art actually is self-consoling fantasy." What constitutes good art for Murdoch, is a depth of *realism*, which "is essentially both pity and justice". Murdoch, *Sovereignty of the Good*, pp.85-87. Also see, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals,* p.499.

[5] Soren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or,* Vol 2, p.193.

finally all differences are levelled, we know that images sometimes don't console. Does a photograph replace a dead person for the bereaved? Does a painted mural on the side of a grim tower block do anything more than relieve the poverty for a split second, before returning the occupants to reality with the realisation of all that they *don't* have? Does art in the end threaten to *keep* possibility in the realm of the imagination?

If we admit that this finally is the case then, unpopular as it sounds in a world intoxicated by the power of imagery, are we therefore obliged to recognise that the theologians task *is* after all that of the Protestant iconoclasts, and the Derridaen critics, in the gradual *de(con)struction* of the image, through which as Simone Weil says, the *distance* which separates imagined possibility from existent possibility is made aware to us? The only way around this conclusion seems to be to collapse imagination and existence, and admit that lived possibilities cannot be distinguished from fantasised possibilities. To say that the moment wherein reality is apprehended *is* an imagined moment, and that consequently images offer not just *consolation* but a reflection of *reality*, is one way around the impasse. But again how are we to judge between an *authentic* imagined moment and a mere fantasy in any way other than through recourse to the *life lived* as an expression of it? And in judging such a life is the analogy with art still legitimate? Is an authentically lived life, authentic because it is *creative*? Or in the end do we not exhaust the resources art can offer to the soul and admit that an authentically lived life is so because it is *good*?

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Murdoch is right in suggesting that there appears to be an internal relationship between truth, goodness and knowledge, whereby,

> "cases of art and skill and ordinary moral discernment ..establish truth and reality by an insight which is an exercise of virtue".[6]

If this were not the case then the words on this page would indeed be meaning*less*. But what is such an "insight that is an exercise of virtue"? Are we here talking about *metaphor? Symbol? Analogy? Narrative?* Or is this insight something that extends possibility *beyond* the realm of the image, and calls upon deeper and sometimes darker human resources like hope, trust, faith and courage? For theological truth to remain in the realm of the image - metaphor, analogy, symbol - is to remain in the world of ideas and of imagined visions of what might be. What is needed is the kind of *lived* vision of what *is* that meets finiteness, suffering and evil with something more durable than art. For Murdoch, the concept of *goodness*, is that which can meet suffering and evil head on, for,

> "Goodness is connected with the acceptance of real death and real chance and real transience.."[7]

It may be suggested of course, that in the process of arguing like this I have successfully removed theological truth from the realm of the public once and for all. That, where art at least offers theological truth a way of making comprehensive claims that do not neglect particularity, I have destroyed such

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[6] Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals,* p.511.

[7] Iris Murdoch, *Sovereignty of the Good* (London, Routledge, Kegan & Paul, 1970), p.103.

comprehensiveness for the sake of particularity, and am therefore admitting that the communitarian approaches to theological truth I rejected in Chapter One, might after all offer a better theological paradigm! This would be a serious charge, were it not for the fact that my intention is not to make theological truth *immune* to cultural criticism, as I think, postliberal and communitarian approaches do. Furthermore, art *does* have a place in my argument, as the *imagined* possibility of goodness.

The heart of my argument focuses on the *publicness* that Tracy believes is characteristic of art. We will remember that reference was made in Chapter Six to Tracy's inversion of Kierkegaard's view that the moral mode of existence is public and the aesthetic and the religious modes are alike in existing in the realm of the individual,

> "A direct relationship between one spiritual being and another, with respect to essential truth, is unthinkable. If such a relationship is assumed, it means that one of the parties has ceased to be spirit."[8]

In Kierkegaard's view the confusion that can exist between *religious* truth claims and *aesthetic* truth claims, is not because they are *indistinguishable* from each other, there is no doubt that for Kierkegaard the religious mode constituted the *highest* passion, but because both are modes of existence that occur in the realm of the *individual*.[9] For Kierkegaard only the *moral* exists in

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[8] Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* p.221.

[9] See the conclusion of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1941), tr. W. Lowrie.

the public realm! Tracy, as we have seen, not only insists on the publicness of the aesthetic, but at times even relegates the moral to the realm of the individual. This may therefore explain a lot. Tracy *is* guilty of collapsing religion and art, and leaves us asking what theology has that poetry doesn't already have! It could be that in the final analysis his mistake is not that art has *no* place in the nature of a theological truth claim, but that the place it has is better understood in the light of Kierkegaard's understanding of an aesthetic-moral-religious continuum. This way the *moral* is the realm open to public criticism, and is the ultimate litmus test of authenticity, even though the achievement of authenticity itself may require a teleological suspension of morality.

> "Whatever is great in the sphere of the universally human must therefore not be communicated as a subject for admiration but as an ethical requirement. In the form of a possibility it becomes a requirement.... the good should be presented in the form of a possibility."[10]

At the end of this thesis what have I constructively said about theological truth between metaphysics and morals? I have said that a theological truth claim is best characterised with the notion of possibility, but that a model of theological truth as the imagined possibility of self-authenticity might not possess all the resources necessary to cope with the suffering encountered in the quest for an authentic life. I have furthermore claimed that the public dimension of such a quest is better conceived of as a mode of *moral* existence rather than *aesthetic* existence. My claim is that to base the critical principle of a theological truth claim upon an aesthetic mode of existence risks privileging metaphysics over

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[10] Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp.320-1.

morals. A better way to balance the requirements of both metaphysics and morals, which relies on art to a lesser extent, is with an understanding of theological truth as the imagined possibility of *goodness*.

The key question I am faced with concerns what might distinguish an imagined possibility of goodness from other lesser, imagined possibilities, and how might representation of it escape the limitations I have described art as having? If I wish to suggest that there is not a blind leap of faith, between the ethical and the religious as some have, then it is surely legitimate to expect to be able to see how the transformative fruits of the imagined possibility of goodness manifest themselves in the moral life! The difference between the imagined possibility of goodness and other imagined possibilities lies in the fact that the imagined possibility of goodness *is fundamentally* transformative in nature. In *The Sovereignty of Good*, Iris Murdoch says,

> "Good lives as it were on both sides of the barrier and we can combine the aspiration to complete goodness with a realistic sense of achievement within our limitations. .. The concept Good resists collapse into the selfish empirical consciousness.[11] (emphasis mine)

This then is what qualifies the imagined possibility of goodness, over all other imagined possibilities. The concept of the Good, provides the possibility of the genuine acceptance of the other, and thus the real authenticity that Ricoeur and Tracy seek. The concept of the Good can do this because it can resist being absorbed by all forms of self-motivation and desire. Goodness - if genuine -

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[11] Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good*, p.93.

escapes desire because it is a gift that comes from without.

The main conclusion of this thesis is that a theological truth claim *is* an imagined possibility of goodness. The question that may still require answering is how such an understanding of theological truth can be expressed epistemologically so that it escapes the weaknesses of the creative imagination. This leads to the second conclusion of the thesis, that a *phronesis* model of rationality, situated in a virtue epistemology, is one that promises the best epistemological framework for a model of theological truth as the imagined possibility of goodness. The precise details of this union is deserving of detailed attention by theologians. I would suggest that a good starting place might be with Linda Zagzebski's work on *phronesis*. With *phronesis* we perhaps have a notion that offers an epistemological bridge between the metaphysical and the moral better than any other we have discussed so far. With *phronesis* we have a critical theological principle that does not reduce theological truth to moral imperatives, nor allow for the privileging of them above such imperatives. *Phronesis* is not a principle that can be reduced to the claim that art is what distinguishes theological truth between metaphysics and morals; yet neither is it one that claims that art has *nothing* to do with theological truth. Furthermore, *phronesis* is a principle that allows for critical judgements between rival theological truth claims without incurring verificationist criteria of legitimation.

In focusing upon *phronesis* we can therefore marry the conclusion of Part One

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of this thesis, with Part Two. In Part One theological truth was accorded an autonomy that legitimated its description as theological, yet which did not necessitate the totalisation or subjugation of other truth claims in a cognitive hierarchy. *Phronesis* can be that which facilitates a *responsible* autonomy for theological truth. It can also be that which holds together apparently conflicting particular truth claims *without reneging on the universal dimension of those claims.* To give *phronesis*, or wisdom, more attention as a critical theological principle, will involve an alteration in our understandings of what constitutes *criteria* in matters of theological judgement. As I have suggested, and as Chapter Three argues, *phronesis* models of reason situated in a virtue epistemology can be the means by which such an alteration can occur. Of course, caution may need to be exercised lest the commitment to publicness is relaxed too much. The conclusion to Chapter Three suggests that, to make *phronesis* the primary criterion of theological truth might necessitate a retreat into the notion of virtuous *communities* as a way of establishing an answer to the question "Whose virtue?". This undoubtedly presents a challenge for future theologians to articulate a non-sectarian form of communitarianism.

The challenge that lies ahead is therefore clear. If (as I have argued) art does involve metaphysical commitments that distance us from the possibility of authenticity, and *phronesis* risks the creation of isolated cults of holiness, then theology has to find a way avoiding both errors. My hope is that with wisdom as the judge of the imagined possibility of goodness such a way can be found.

Theological truth claims can survive the ravages modernity has inflicted upon them. The best way to do so is not to ground the critical principle of theological truth in an unfettered creative imagination, but in an epistemology of virtue. With wisdom, as that form of rationality which is both an epistemological act and an ethical act, both metaphysical and moral, the imagined possibility of goodness becomes real, and the transformation of the human situation can begin.

APPENDIX A:

A: On Traditional Understandings of Theological Language

In Medieval Christian theology three ways of understanding theological language became dominant.[1] The first holds that theological language is not in any way adequate to an encounter with the divine. This approach suggests that the ultimate truth of theological language is only accessed via a *negation* of the medium it is conveyed by. The via negativa is arguably identifiable in all the major religions of the world.[2] Meister Eckhart, Maimonedes and Al Ghazali - all represent important thinkers in the three monotheistic traditions, and have all appealed to the idea that the truth or referent of theological language is accessed only through its negation. This is clearly an important tradition which reminds us of the possible ambiguity of language, however, on its own, it lapses into an inverted metaphysics which gives us no hope of distinguishing between an edifying paradox and a destructive and false contradiction. The second way of understanding theological language in Medieval theology, held, in contrast to the via negativa, that the referent of theological language *can* be apprehended directly. This approach - classically articulated by John Duns Scotus - believes religious language to be *univocal*, that is, statements about God are not equivocal - having more than one possible referent - but univocal, having only one possible referent. Although used in a number of contemporary theological agendas the inherent difficulty with it is in maintaining the *transcendence* of the ultimate referent of religious language. It is conceivable that a religion with a less vehemently transcendent deity, than the one that the Christian tradition has generally defended, might use univocal language more comfortably without risk of contradiction.[3] Nevertheless, for Christianity, univocal language about God must clearly be used at the expense of the transcendence of its referent. It is because of the inadequacies of the first two ways of understanding religious

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[1] See Chapter 2, "Historical Approaches to Religious Language", in Dan Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol and Story* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1996).

[2] See W. T. Stace, *The Teachings of the Mystics* (New York, 1960).

[3] I am thinking of the complex, yet deeply personal phenomenon of worship in Hinduism. Where an individual performs puja, to interpret an expression like "My God is Krishna" univocally, need not carry the same meaning as it might for the Christian monotheist. Even here however, we can imagine that univocal language about the individual's relationship with the deity might become strained.

language, that a third way was suggested, classically by Thomas Aquinas.[4] This approach holds that religious language is *analogical*. Aquinas argued that there must be a *mean* between equivocal language and univocal language, otherwise we are forced into one of the two earlier positions. This mean is analogical language which neither assumes a *direct* referent (like univocal language), nor admits to the possibility of *any* referent (like equivocal language). For Aquinas all knowledge and language of God is analogical.[5]

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[4]   For an excellent analysis of Aquinas' doctrine of analogy see Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992). As Davies points out Aquinas was in no respect entirely original in his presentation of analogy but indebted to a number of 13th century thinkers, who were in turn indebted to Aristotle.

[5] Aquinas' account of the analogical way may, or may not, be thought of as intentionally systematic. It is sophisticated by the distinction between an analogy of attribution, and an analogy of proportionality.

APPENDIX B:

While too much talk of an existential 'moment' can easily become lost in clouds of vaporous mysticism, there is nonetheless a truth in the fact that an understanding of the spiritual life - which the comprehensiveness of religion offers, and theological truth claims represent - is aided by existentialist terminology. Kierkegaard is clearly one of the greatest sources of such terminology, and has consequently imbued existentialist theology with a vocabulary that it could scarce function without. Interpretations differ over Kierkegaard's deliberately ambiguous works - his love of caricature and polemic contribute to the richness and depth of his work - but there is at least little dispute that he envisioned the possibility of three "modes of existence".[1] The debate over whether and what kind of *continuum* exists between the three modes, the aesthetic, the moral and the religious, is a familiar one for theologians. Stewart Sutherland's Chapter on Kierkegaard in *Faith and Ambiguity*, helps clear away some of the unhelpful myths about Kierkegaard's thought.[2] In particular Sutherland helps us attain a more balanced understanding of the relationship between Kierkegaard's three 'modes', suggesting that,

> "it is not a mistake to suggest that there are three different types or stages of life discussed by Kierkegaard, but it is a gross error to suggest that the three different stages, or forms of life are so discrete that the aesthetic and the ethical play no part at all in the religious."[3]

Sutherland also stresses that the much debated "teleological suspension" of the *ethical* mode of existence, does not commit Kierkegaard to moral relativism, but is an insistence in reaction to Kant, that a religious mode of existence should *not* be used as some kind of foundation for morality.

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[1] Although reference to all three 'modes' of existence is made in most of Kierkegaard's works, the contrast between the aesthetic and the ethical is made most pointedly in *Either/Or*, while the contrast between the ethical and the religious is made most explicit in *Fear and Trembling*. See Patrick Gardiner, *Kierkegaard* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988), pp.40-41.

[2] See Stewart Sutherland, *Faith and Ambiguity* (London, SCM Press Ltd, 1984), pp.42-75.

[3] Ibid., p.48.

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