

## **BETWEEN REVISIONISTS AND POSTLIBERALS: A REVIEW ARTICLE<sup>1</sup>**

By Charles W. Allen

RIVALRY IS FUN. At least it's fun for theologians. Sometimes it can be instructive. Too often, however, it is simply misleading. William Placher suggests that the rivalry between what he calls "revisionist" and "postliberal" theologians is becoming too misleading and so has written a book which, he hopes, "can provide some categories that let both parties say what they mean in their best moments" (p. 20). That is not the only concern he addresses, but those already caught up in it will be unable to avoid reading this remarkably well-written book in terms of that rivalry.

Revisionists, according to Placher, are Christian theologians who "think it particularly important to correlate Christian beliefs with concerns and experiences that all people share and to stand ready to defend Christian convictions according to 'publicly acceptable' criteria of truth" (pp. 17-18). The theologians mentioned most frequently under this label include David Tracy (who coined the term), Schubert Ogden, Langdon Gilkey, James Gustafson and Gordon Kaufman. With the exception of Gordon Kaufman (and others mentioned less frequently), there is an obvious link between this movement and the University of Chicago Divinity School.

Postliberals, on the other hand, are Christian theologians who prefer mostly to focus on "describing the *internal* logic of Christian faith" without worrying about "criteria acceptable to all rational persons" and in fact "doubt that there *are* such criteria" (p. 18). Theologians falling under this label include George Lindbeck (who coined the term<sup>2</sup>), Hans Frei, David Kelsey, Stanley Hauerwas and Ronald Thiemann. Again there is a link between the movement and a divinity school, only this time it's Yale.

Revisionists accuse postliberals of retreating from the challenges of modernity and religious pluralism. Postliberals, on the other hand, accuse revisionists of letting contemporary culture set the theological agenda to the point where Christians no longer have anything to say that couldn't be said better in non-Christian terms. Placher admits that sometimes both sides wind up *looking* exactly as their critics portray them, but he believes nevertheless that "the most thoughtful writers on both sides are trying to say the right things" (p. 18). Revisionists are right to insist "that Christians really do need to talk to non-

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Christians and therefore need to find common ground from which that conversation can begin" (p. 18). But postliberals are also right "to resist overarching theories that see Christianity as one local instance of some universal essence of religion or set out some general theory of what it means to be 'rational' which Christians and everyone else must accept before real conversation can begin" (p. 154). There must therefore be ways of finding common ground which do not require embracing overarching theories of religion or rationality. Placher believes such ways can be found in "a new pluralistic model of conversation now being discussed in many quarters" (p. 12). This model would encourage Christians and others to speak of their distinctive convictions "unapologetically," that is, without first having to *demonstrate* the truth of their convictions in ways that would convince skeptics as much as believers.

The irony about this argument for unapologetic theology is that it occurs in a book which is itself a sustained and skillfully wrought apologetic. If Placher had intended to rule apologetics out altogether, this would be a problem. But that was never his aim. It is only certain overly grandiose, dictatorial conceptions of apologetics that would be ruled out. But less systematic, "ad hoc" sorts of apologetics would not only be permitted but positively required, at least for those who follow "the logic of Christian faith" (p. 167).

"Ad hoc apologetics" is of course a slogan dear to postliberals, and Placher's choice of terminology reveals, as he readily admits, that even in his attempt to stake out a middle ground his sympathies nevertheless lie more on the postliberal side. But such an admission is only to be expected in a book that warns against "self-proclaimed mediators who claim to stand in neutral territory" (p. 155). Even so, Placher's portrayals of revisionist theologians (especially David Tracy) are perhaps the most generous to be found originating from the postliberal side. That is not to say that his portrayals are entirely satisfactory, at least to this revisionist, but compared with the usual name-calling (on both sides, I'm afraid) they represent a welcome advance.

I hope this will become an influential book. It is certainly a delight to read and seems largely successful in providing categories that would make the Chicago-Yale rivalry less irksome. A number of us on the revisionist side have come to similar conclusions over the past few years<sup>3</sup> and are therefore

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encouraged to find a kindred spirit among the competition. Perhaps the time is now ripe for more fruitful exchanges. Indeed, I find myself challenged to respond to the book with the same spirit of generosity Placher seems to have captured. This is not, I confess, the way I have always responded to postliberals in the past, because their own lack of generosity toward us seemed all too evident.<sup>4</sup> But Placher encourages a different sort of response. Maybe this will help to atone.

The need for apologetic theology has seemed especially urgent to some theologians once certain models of rationality came into vogue. Since the Enlightenment, influential thinkers have repeatedly sought to remove rationality as far as possible from any association with the practical concerns of particular traditions (or for that matter, particular cultures, communities or individuals). Early rationalists tried to do this by appealing to self-evident principles, while empiricists looked to uninterpreted sense experience to accomplish the same result. In our own century, "falsificationists" in philosophy of science (e.g., Karl Popper) have held that a chronically suspicious attitude, always looking for decisive refutations of accepted theories, is what separates the truly critical thinker from the rationalizing ideologue. Even thinkers who seem committed to bringing about a just society (e.g., Jurgen Habermas and John Rawls) have sought to justify their aims in terms that would make their prior commitments utterly irrelevant to deciding the issue. With all these models of rationality the message is the same: if you want your beliefs to look rational, you must downplay any connection they might seem to have with practical concerns or particular circumstances. Such a message makes the apologetic theologian's appeals to "publicly acceptable criteria of truth" look like the only option available.

But as Placher recounts over the course of several chapters, each of these models of rationality runs into trouble if pressed too far. On closer inspection the aloof universality each model claims for itself winds up looking downright parochial. Not surprisingly, then, a number of recent thinkers have turned to some form of relativism. French post-structuralists like Michel Foucault lean toward a rather nihilistic form of relativism, "in which nothing can be defended as good or true" (p. 92). On the other hand, Richard Rorty, one of the most influential gadflies in North American philosophy, uses an interpretation of pragmatism to endorse a less extreme form of relativism which, Placher believes, encourages "a kind of self-satisfaction in which one retreats to 'the way the world looks to us', refusing to make claims beyond that

intellectual ghetto but finding it possible to live quite comfortably there" (p. 92).

In a different context, people sensitive to the integrity of other cultures often seem to adopt an attitude known as "Wittgensteinian fideism," insisting that "no culture--or religion--can be criticized from 'outside' its own life and practices" (p. 57). (Whether Wittgenstein ever shared that point of view is a separate matter.) There are even philosophers of science (e.g., Paul Feyerabend and, more debatably, Thomas S. Kuhn) who, after rejecting falsificationism, seem to suggest that all our attempts to be rational are driven by basically irrational motives. Feyerabend sometimes goes so far as to say that science, even at its reputed best, is "no more rational than magic or witchcraft" (p. 44).

Obviously, to any of these sorts of relativist, the apologetic theologian's concern for publicly acceptable criteria of truth would appear ludicrous. But even though Placher agrees with many of the relativists' critiques of Enlightenment ideals, he does not want to ally unapologetic theology with relativism. For one thing, although he mentions it only briefly, he seems to be persuaded by philosopher Donald Davidson's argument that people and cultures actually have to share a good many concepts and beliefs in common in order even to notice that they disagree on certain subjects (p. 49). For another, the reason why relativists tend to see irrationality everywhere they look is because they fail to challenge the Enlightenment's narrow definitions of "the rational." Placher argues that what we need instead is "a broader definition of what counts as 'rational' or 'a good argument'" (p. 46).

A broader understanding of rationality would recognize that particular traditions can actually play a positive role in sound reasoning. Here Placher acknowledges a particular indebtedness to Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics. According to Gadamer, traditions provide our questioning with enough direction to keep us from being paralyzed (cf. p. 111). Admittedly, traditions can also drown out questions that need to be heard. The Enlightenment's defenders (like Habermas) are right to point this out, but they would be wrong to conclude that this was the only influence traditions can have. "We have to find ways to avoid the stultifying force of tradition without refusing to listen to the voices of tradition altogether" (p. 115), especially since the Enlightenment's ideals are themselves part of a tradition.

Gadamer's reflections suggest that traditions are not rigidly fixed or confining (even when some of their adherents try to make them so), for the only way to remain loyal to a tradition is by constantly reinterpreting it in response to new situations (p. 112). For Gadamer this process of reinterpretation is too

lively to be captured by rules or principles, since even these have to be reinterpreted in unpredictable ways.<sup>5</sup> It is better characterized as a conversation, in which the participants continue to occupy different standpoints but are nevertheless able to understand each other because their "horizons" are, at least for the moment, "fused." (Without taking the comparison too far, think of looking through a pair of binoculars: fusing the two viewpoints doesn't cancel out their differences but adds a dimension of depth to what we see.)

Placher believes these models of conversation and horizon-fusing can help us understand not only how people reinterpret their own traditions but also how people from different traditions can begin to understand each other without having to leave their distinctive standpoints behind. My most basic convictions may seem vastly different from yours, yet when we converse much of what you say, to my surprise, may make enough sense in terms of my *own* convictions that I wind up viewing everything a bit differently. That doesn't mean I've abandoned my original convictions (though of course that too can happen), or that I've suspended them (which may not be possible if they're *that* basic), nor does it mean that I find yours any less perplexing (even though I'm bound to take them a little more seriously). Nevertheless, I can't deny that I've learned something from the exchange. I can acknowledge that much even if I never figure out exactly how it could have happened.

Placher stresses that participating in such a conversation does not require people to suspend belief in the ultimate truth of their particular traditions' claims (pp. 130, 166). In fact, "the most interesting conversation partners may well be those persons who have entered most deeply into the particularities of their own traditions" (p. 147). On the other hand, Placher admits, "I would not be a serious conversation partner if I said (and meant), 'Nothing anyone could say or show me could conceivably alter my Christian faith'" (p. 148). I have to allow for "the possibility that you might be right and I might be wrong" (p. 147). But wouldn't this require suspending belief after all? Placher doesn't think so. Allowing for this possibility is not the same as *expecting* it to happen. Such fundamental changes in conviction always come with a "shocking unexpectedness" (p. 148). So while fundamental change is a real possibility, we are apparently entitled to retain a presumption in favor of the convictions we already have. "*Serious* dialogue indeed requires openness to change, but it also demands a sense of how significant changing one's faith would be" (p. 149).

Obviously, if this sort of conversation can happen we have to

acknowledge that the conversation partners have more in common than they may have thought. Placher does acknowledge this. But what they have in common will vary according to who the conversation partners are (pp. 158-159): What Christians have in common with Jews may not be the same as what they have in common with Buddhists. And even where conversation partners agree that they have something in common, they may still disagree over what that "something" is and what its implications are. Such elusive points of agreement will not yield an overarching theory. Nor do Placher's accounts of tradition and conversation need to be taken as examples of such a theory. They are meant to be taken only as suggestive models.

Placher returns in his final chapter to the rivalry between revisionists and postliberals, arguing that the model of pluralistic conversation can serve the principal concerns of both. It also suggests that "the dividing of theology into these two (warring?) camps is itself a distortion" (p. 155). Some self-styled revisionists and postliberals may find more in common with each other than with others in their own camps. For example, from time to time throughout the book Placher, in critiquing Enlightenment assumptions and lowest-common-denominator approaches to interreligious dialogue, turns not to a postliberal but to David Tracy--the exemplary revisionist (p. 155)--to make his point. And he finds postliberals fairly confused about "what it means to call theological claims 'true'" (p. 161). Nevertheless, as we saw earlier, Placher finally considers himself more of a postliberal than a revisionist. That is partly because he believes Enlightenment models of rationality are still predominant in academic circles and are quite capable of silencing other voices (pp. 168-169). But he also believes our contemporary culture perpetuates so many injustices that what it most needs to hear from Christians, for the time being, is a word of judgment in light of the gospel (p. 169). The times call for openness as well, but it is the distinctiveness of Christian faith that needs the most emphasis.

I have already indicated that I find Placher's book largely successful in suggesting ways to move beyond tiresome name-calling in exchanges between revisionists and postliberals. In fact, I wish one of us revisionists had written it, which brings me to the major critical point I want to make. I want to suggest (somewhat playfully) that maybe one of us did write the book. Maybe, like one of Rahner's "anonymous Christians," Placher is really more revisionist than postliberal and just doesn't know it. I'll avoid phrasing the point in Rahner's terms, since they are bound to mislead.<sup>6</sup> Still (to get a little more serious), I want to take the remainder of this review article to argue that Placher may be

closer to revisionism than he thinks and that he would have little to lose and much to gain by more explicitly including some distinctively revisionist moves in his model of pluralistic conversation.

The patron saint of postliberalism is of course Karl Barth. So it is pertinent to note that Barth would probably accuse Placher of already having gone over to the other side. Unlike Placher, Barth could never admit even the remote possibility of Christian faith being undercut by a voice from any *other* tradition.<sup>7</sup> Entertaining such a possibility with any sort of seriousness would always result in subordinating faith to an alien power.<sup>8</sup> Placher would agree that this is too often exactly what happens, but he apparently does not think it the only possible outcome. Barth would reply that this is precisely the sort of waffling that gives "natural theology" all the foothold it needs to achieve monopoly.<sup>9</sup> I think Barth is wrong about this, and so would any other revisionist.<sup>10</sup> Placher apparently thinks Barth is wrong on this point too, but I suspect that if he were to spell out why he thinks so he would wind up blurring the distinction between the two approaches even more than he already has.

One reason Placher may still regard himself as more postliberal than revisionist is that his general descriptions of the revisionist approach, though intended to be charitable, still tend to be lop-sided. Like other postliberals, Placher tends to view revisionists as *primarily*, in some cases even *exclusively*, preoccupied with translating Christian convictions into supposedly generic terms in order to assess their adequacy. Now in fact all revisionists, Tracy included, do believe that some sort of generalizing move is an essential task for any theologian. But none of them has ever claimed that this is the only or even the most important task. All of them agree that it is at least as important to show what is *distinctive* about Christian convictions. Even Schubert Ogden, probably the most rationalistic-looking revisionist, insists that, no matter how credible a theological statement might be on general terms, it would still be inadequate if it were not also an appropriate expression of "normative Christian witness."<sup>11</sup> Ogden criticizes the early liberals precisely because, in their concern for intellectual respectability, they "failed . . . to respect the distinctive claims of faith itself."<sup>12</sup> Readers may understandably be puzzled as to how Ogden reconciles this concern for particularity with his unmistakable craving for generality (along with his making the theologian's personal faith an optional matter). They may conclude, as Placher does (p. 159), that the distinctiveness of Christian faith finally becomes subordinate to metaphysics. But that would be to overlook the distinctive way that *process* metaphysics rethinks the

relationship between the particular and the universal: neither has to be viewed as entirely subordinate to the other; both are *mutually* informative.<sup>13</sup> That sort of reciprocity, I am convinced, is precisely what Ogden, along with other revisionists, has in mind in describing the theologian's task in terms, not of subordination, but of "correlation."<sup>14</sup>

Now as we have already seen, Placher does sometimes describe revisionists in terms of correlation. But he still seems to have missed the point that for revisionists correlation is always a *two-way* or "dipolar" process. One of those poles always involves an interpretation of one's own tradition while the other always involves an interpretation of one's broader, contemporary situation.<sup>15</sup> Correlating them means that each pole gets a turn at informing and challenging the other and that neither is permitted to control the exchange or its outcomes (which will vary according to the concrete issue being addressed).<sup>16</sup> One could easily sum up the whole process in the words of Placher's subtitle: "A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation." Perhaps this is easier to miss in Ogden's case, because there the process seems so tightly coordinated that the reciprocity involved is barely noticeable.<sup>17</sup> But correlation as pluralistic conversation is an increasingly prominent theme in Tracy's work, where it gets stretched and twisted so far that many readers, like Placher (p. 155), wonder how he can continue to claim much continuity with his original revisionist manifesto (*Blessed Rage for Order*).<sup>18</sup> Indeed, though Placher still worries about it becoming an all-subsuming "superconversation" (p. 159), Tracy's model of conversation has by now become so pluralistic and so volatile that it seems if anything to be in danger of flying apart altogether.

Tracy is keenly aware that everything could indeed fly apart. What ultimately sustains his trust and hope in conversation is a strategy he has come to describe as an "analogical imagination." Its credibility seems to depend on a number of convictions which, Tracy admits, are finally theological.<sup>19</sup> Those convictions can, I think, be summarized in the following three statements: 1) There are real differences among us which are often dangerous. 2) They may not, and in some cases definitely should not, lend themselves to complete resolution or satisfactory explanation. 3) Ultimately, however, people (and things) still have enough in common to enable and demand working for practically viable, if tension-fraught, varieties of solidarity in both our understanding and our common life.<sup>20</sup>

The "cash value" of these convictions seems to be a strategy that encourages precisely the kind of pluralistic, tradition-rooted conversation that

Placher wants. With an analogical imagination we can enter conversations without suspending our convictions or trying to control what happens by invoking presumed universal principles. We can acknowledge with Placher (see pp. 123-135) that simply describing one's convictions or recounting a narrative can have a genuine persuasive power (indeed a public claim to truth) that will never be captured by arguments.<sup>21</sup> And when the times call for it, we can, again like Placher, choose to emphasize the distinctiveness of our convictions without ignoring our need to remain open.

What then would keep Placher from identifying his own model as revisionist? While I have tried to show his own model of conversation is closer to Tracy's than he thinks, there is still at least one important issue over which he and Tracy would be likely to disagree. Tracy believes conversations can be corrected and enriched by occasionally invoking what seem to be universal standards of rationality and publicness. He does not think this will automatically stifle pluralism (though the risk is always there). Placher, on the other hand, suspects (and sometimes takes it for granted) that there are no such standards, and that people who invoke them will indeed automatically wind up *dismissing* those who disagree "as primitives to be forcibly educated or lunatics to be locked up" (p. 168). Is there any reason why Placher should reconsider his position? I think so.

I doubt that anyone can converse seriously without relying on some generally applicable notion or image, however open-ended, of who might count as a worthwhile conversation partner.<sup>22</sup> This can be dangerous, but I see no reason to think it any more dangerous than trying to get by without concern for such notions, especially where people like Placher continue to regard their beliefs as somehow true in a sense much stronger than "true for me."<sup>23</sup> In any case, the craving for generality seems so widespread in so many cultures that we ought to keep looking for ways to make the best of it (so it won't make the worst of us).

The advantage of Tracy's analogical imagination is that it does find a place for that craving while at the same time providing strategies for keeping it in its place. Within the context of an analogical imagination appeals to universal standards are no longer confined to traditional, rigidly hierarchical patterns of deduction and induction. Instead of invoking a sharp difference in kind between particulars and universals it tends to treat them as analogues (i. e., universals are no longer *that* universal, and particulars are no longer *that* particular, but neither are they simply identical). And the ways they may prove

relevant to each other are themselves somewhat analogous to a pluralistic conversation; each, so to speak, gets to have its own say in the matter. This enables us to acknowledge with Placher that we can have a fruitful conversation even when we don't all agree on what such a conversation ought to look like. But it also prepares us for occasions where disagreements of that sort may have to be addressed, instead of being pronounced obsolete (as on p. 159).

I've been trying to nudge Placher a little closer to the revisionist side. But there is an irony involved here, because in doing so I've probably wound up making revisionist models look a little more postliberal than usual. That is no disappointment. It is simply one indication that perhaps Placher's conversation model really does enable more fruitful ways for people in both camps to discuss their differences. That sort of contribution is long overdue, but for that reason it is, I think, all the more important.

## NOTES

1. William C. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 178 pp., \$13.95.

2. Lindbeck coined the term "postliberal" in its present, more popular usage in his *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984). It is somewhat ironic that revisionists had been using the term for over a decade to describe their own agenda. See, for example, Schubert M. Ogden, *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), pp. 3ff; David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), pp. 32-34.

3. For example, see my "The Primacy of *Phronesis*: A Proposal for Avoiding Frustrating Tendencies in Our Conceptions of Rationality" in *The Journal of Religion* 69 (1989):359-374.

4. In a letter I once wrote to *The Christian Century*, responding angrily to what I took to be a vicious and arrogant attack on *us* by one of *them*, I used several choice phrases and comparisons which (along with remarks from several other letters in that issue) struck Placher as astonishingly "virulent." I did in fact compare the author (William Willimon) to Pontius Pilate (which Placher mentions on p. 20), but only after Willimon had used the same comparison against revisionists. I also accused postliberals of "theological imperialism" and of demanding "an oath of loyalty to the 'Yale school'" (which Placher mentions in another book). This did not foster mutual understanding, though it was still great fun. While it wouldn't absolve us completely, I do think, if Placher is going to mention how virulent we letter-writers were, he should refrain from characterizing Willimon's article simply as "a sympathetic summary of postliberal theology" (p. 19). We weren't responding to a sympathetic summary. See William Willimon, "Answering Pilate: Truth and the Postliberal Church" in *The Christian Century* 104 (1987):308-309. Placher's other reference to these letters appears in his chapter on postliberal theology in David F. Ford, ed., *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 115.

5. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), p. 49.

6. Placher's attitude toward Rahner is somewhat puzzling. On the one hand, Placher acknowledges that "in one sense, the devout adherents of any faith indeed believe that they understand the adherents of other traditions better

than they understand themselves" (p. 144). He has no objection to that attitude in general. But Rahner's notion of anonymous Christianity suggests that Rahner understands "the *real aims*" of others' faith and practice better than they do. This Placher finds "ethnocentric and finally a bit insulting" (p. 145). Why is it insulting to credit others, as Rahner does, with at least partial understanding of what we take to be ultimate reality, and *not* insulting to regard them as altogether ignorant? If one is insulting, surely the other would be too (though in fact I would be a little less miffed by Rahner's attempt, however flawed, to be more inviting). In any case, if conversation partners worry too much about insulting each other they won't have anything interesting left to talk about.

7. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2, part 1, trans. T. H. L. Parker, *et al.*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), pp. 4-9. Of course for Barth no Christian's faith was infallible, but it could be challenged only by the Word of God--not by, say, a Buddhist.

8. See *ibid.* pp. 5, 136-142, 172-178. I am not even trying to do justice to the intriguing nuances of Barth's "slippery slope" argument.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

10. Barth thinks "the logic of the matter demands " natural theology's monopoly as the only possible outcome when we "give it a place at all" (*Ibid.*). But if our ways of reasoning turn out to be as elastic as more recent discussions suggest, it becomes difficult to claim that *the* logic of the matter could *demand* anything as the *only* possible outcome.

11. Schubert M. Ogden, *On Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), p. 4.

12. Schubert M. Ogden, *The Reality of God*, p. 4.

13. I should add that process thought seems to have trouble preserving this basic insight to the extent that its proponents cling to mathematically inspired ideals of conceptual precision and formal coherence. If we want to talk about relationships between *mutually informative* universals and particulars, we surely need to explore more elastic ways of thinking. On that issue see my "The primacy of *Phronesis*," pp. 365-368. Frank Burch Brown offers a more elastic account of process categories in *Transfiguration: Poetic Metaphor and the Languages of Religious Belief* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983). His sympathetic critique of Ogden (pp. 148-181) is especially pertinent, as well as convergent with many of Placher's (and my own) concerns.

14. Ogden, *On Theology*, p. 3.
15. See David Tracy, "Theological Method," in Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King, eds., *Christian Theology: An Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 36.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 56.57.
17. Ogden would, I think, view such coordination as a strength, though he would probably recognize some down sides to it. I would agree that it can be a strength in certain highly specific contexts, but I suspect those contexts are a lot rarer than Ogden may assume.
18. Tracy's model does seem to have been radically revised. Here is a summary of what I take to be the crucial shifts in Tracy's position. In *Blessed Rage for Order* Tracy seems to be saying that only a metaphysics "capable of articulating *conceptual* and not merely *symbolic* categories" (p. 55) can confirm the "truth-status" of our convictions (see pp. 52-56). But even here he seems to hedge a bit: metaphysics (or transcendental reflection), while unavoidable, is also unprovable (p. 68), and its concepts can be analogical (in a more tension-fraught sense than usual) rather than literal (pp. 108,118, n. 90). In any case, things look very different in *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981). Now *all* authentic reflection is hermeneutical and thus conversational (p. 102), and genuine conversation is made possible by an irreducibly tensive analogical imagination where the "other" remains "other" and reconciliation (even a tensive one) remains more a hope than a reality(pp. 363, 410). This permits a recognition of classics as any "intensifications of particularity" which, as particular (or "other"), are more-than-particularly informative (pp. 107-135). Poetics (formerly relegated to the "merely symbolic"), rhetoric and ethical-political praxis can now "provide persuasive truth claims even when not formulated in [the] explicit (dialectical) arguments [of metaphysics]" (p. 86, n. 34). (And all these different ways of providing truth claims are analogous.) Metaphysical moves provide relatively abstract, heuristic correctives to the more concrete activity of systematic and practical theologies. But the correctives are then subject to further correction when appropriate by these more concrete activities, which now seem to have the most influential say in the matter (pp. 96-97). Eventually (and perhaps inevitably), conversation replaces argument as the primary and more encompassing candidate for publicness. Argument (which now comes in several varieties) is now only one of many "interruptions" within conversation (along with method, explanation, theory, the baffling otherness within language itself, and the often frightening otherness of history) that occur only when the occasion demands. See *Plurality and Ambiguity* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), pp. 23, 27, 29, 120, n. 57. Such interruptions, moreover, require

even further revisions in Tracy's analogical imagination (itself already a revision). See Tracy, "Review Symposium: *Plurality and Ambiguity*," *Theology Today* 44 (1988):514-515. Even so, Tracy has by no means given up on the importance and relevance of appealing to purportedly universal criteria of publicness in our conversations, but in the context of a revised analogical imagination we don't need to lose much sleep over them.

19. Tracy, "Review Symposium," p. 514.

20. This ultimately practical orientation in Tracy's model is sometimes overlooked, partly because Tracy has yet to give it a thorough treatment. But it is still a pervasive theme which invites us to view his analogical imagination as a revised form (or analogue) of Aristotelian practical wisdom (*phronesis*). (See *Plurality and Ambiguity*, p. 22.) My own work on that subject is largely indebted to Tracy's model.

21. Unfortunately Placher doesn't recognize that this is precisely what is involved in Tracy's appeal to classics. He seems to think Tracy is appealing only to what *our* culture recognizes as a classic (see p. 157-159). But that is precisely the view of classics that Tracy wants to subvert. For Tracy, *any* culture's or subculture's classics, however peculiar, can by that very peculiarity "yield a form of authentically shareable, public discourse" (*Analogical Imagination*, p. 134). Ironically, given his usually appreciative and sensitive treatment of Tracy, Placher's misunderstanding of Tracy on this point strikes me as the gravest flaw in the entire book.

22. Placher seems to grant this at one point, but he only considers alternatives that are either too trivial (e.g., the physical possibility of communication) or perhaps too strict (e.g., Habermas' ideal speech conditions). See pp. 114-115. But the number of more plausible and less trivial alternatives could well be endless.

23. Placher's attempt to distinguish claims about truth from claims about justification may let him off the hook up to a point (p. 123). But I suspect the distinction is too permeable to allow him to sound so relativistic about one sort of claim and so realistic about the other.