Voices from the Next Generation

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THE AMBIGUITY OF INTERDISCIPLINARITY

by Andrea Hollingsworth

Abstract. What kind of consciousness is best prepared to undertake effective interdisciplinary explorations in religion and science in our twenty-first century context? This paper draws on the thought of theologian David Tracy and psychologist and philosopher of religion James W. Jones to suggest that negation and ecstasy are mutually conditioning factors that go into the shaping of just such a consciousness. Healthy, constructive modes of relating to the disciplinary other imply the emergence of a transformed way of knowing and being wherein the scholar countenances the loss of controlling and autonomous ways of relating (negation), and precisely in that loss, enters into shared spaces of mutually illuminative and transformative understanding (ecstasy).

Keywords: epistemology; hermeneutics; interdisciplinary method; James W. Jones; psychoanalysis; relationality; revisionist; David Tracy

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Many of today's theologians are convinced that constructive engagement with the sciences is no longer optional but rather necessary for adequate work in their field.[1] In addition, a number of contemporary scientists and philosophers of science acknowledge the pressing need for serious collaboration with religion,[2] and recent years have witnessed a proliferation of books on methods by which to fruitfully relate religion and science.[3]

However, scant attention has been paid to the existential experience and psychological demands of actually *doing* this work. There is a pressing need to consider the personal and interpersonal dynamics involved in risking authentic dialogue with a disciplinary other whose

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questions, assumptions, methods, and findings may ask us—whatever our discipline—to radically refigure (or perhaps altogether jettison) deeply held beliefs, self-understandings, and worldviews. Thus the guiding query of this essay is: What kind of consciousness is able to undertake effective interdisciplinary explorations between religion and science in our twenty-first century context?

Theologian David Tracy and psychologist and philosopher of religion James W. Jones each offer important resources for understanding factors that go into the shaping of just such a consciousness. If it is agreed that interdisciplinarity implies a dynamic relation with an "other" whose presence often means both promise and threat to our beliefs, self-understandings, and worldviews, then Tracy and Jones—from different disciplinary vantage points—invite us to acknowledge and embrace the cognitive and existential ambiguity of the twenty-first century interdisciplinary task. By means of an exposition of Tracy's and Jones's work, this paper suggests that authentic and generative ways of relating to the disciplinary other involve the emergence of a transformed consciousness that countenances the loss of controlling and detached ways of knowing and relating (negation), and precisely in that loss, enters into shared spaces of mutually illuminative understanding (ecstasy).

David Tracy

In both his revisionist model of theology ([1975] 1996; 1981)[4] as well as his more recent conception of theology as resistance and hope (1987), David Tracy offers invaluable insights on the subjective experience of the theologian who risks authentic encounter with a genuine other in the interpretive process. For Tracy, the dynamics of negation and ecstasy play largely into the theologian's experience as he or she attempts to respond adequately to the theoretical and practical challenges of our contemporary situation.

We begin with negation, which, for Tracy, is woven deeply into the fabric of authentic interpretation. One of the constant refrains in Tracy's work over the years has been his insistence that the autonomous ego of the modern self must be dethroned. He consistently challenges the pretension that the single subject can understand anything in a direct, transparent, unaffected, or controlling manner. Authentic understanding comes not through assertive presumption but through vulnerable encounter and openness to transformation on ideological, ethical, and existential levels.

The power of the negative is prominent in chapter eight of *The Analogical Imagination* (1981) wherein Tracy discusses the theological interpretation of the "classics" of "the situation."[5] When theologians attempt to render meaningful the world in which they find themselves, they discover that they

are, like everyone else, "groping at every moment to understand, to discern how to live a worthwhile life in this place, at this moment" (1981, 337). So they listen to the voices of classics in different disciplines—art, the social sciences, philosophy, ethics, cultural criticism, natural sciences—to discern patterns that can help name the fundamental questions of existence today (1981, 343, 354). In listening, theologians find that these classics hold tremendous negative power to "unmask illusion, conflict, contradiction, distortion, compulsion in our individual, societal and cultural lives" (1981, 349). Thus for Tracy, theological interpretation of classics is an inherently interdisciplinary endeavor that demands risky dialogue across the illusory boundaries of safety we have built within "our own little groups." This intentional self-exposure to the other is what makes possible theologians' resistance to "bogus affirmations," "principles of domination," and a "self-imposed deafness and blindness to the reality we all face" (1981, 362). Owing to their disruptive power, encounters with classics across the disciplines may raise our blood pressure; may evoke anxiety at a deep level; may mean our transformation.

Risky exposure-of-self-to-other is also a prominent theme in Tracy's more recent *Plurality and Ambiguity* (1987). In the closing chapter he argues that the power of religious interpretation lies precisely in its ability to interrupt and disrupt our perceived sense of self-mastery and unaffectedness. For Tracy, theologians must "resist" themselves. On an "existential level," this resistance " . . . suggests a willingness to enter the conversation, that unnerving place where one is willing to risk all one's present self-understanding by facing the claims to attention of the other" (1987, 93). The risk of a certain loss-of-self-understanding in the encounter with the other—including the disciplinary other and, especially, the suffering other—is ingredient to any adequate theological interpretation of our pluralistic and ambiguous late modern milieu. Moreover, it is likely that Tracy would affirm this risk as relevant not only in theological but also in scientific interpretive contexts.

And what of ecstasy? For Tracy, losing-of-self is profoundly linked with finding-of-self. As the self risks dispossession, a new identity may emerge by means of ecstatic entering-into the world of the other. The crucial role of the ecstatic in human knowledge and selfhood is especially evident in one of Tracy's earliest works, *Blessed Rage for Order* ([1975] 1996). Here he argues that science is "authentic" insofar as it is "self-transcendent"—that is, insofar as it moves beyond itself, through questioning, ever more deeply and meaningfully into the intelligible world. Summing and building upon the thought of his former mentor Bernard Lonergan ([1972] 1990), Tracy writes: "One lives authentically insofar as one continues to allow oneself an expanding horizon. That expansion has as its chief aim the going-beyond one's present state in accordance with the transcendental imperatives: 'Be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, be responsible,

develop and, if necessary, change'" ([1975] 1996, 96). Here cognitive and existential openness to the as-of-yet-unknown is what makes possible true knowledge and authentic existence.

Now it is important to note that the above quote references *scientists'* self-transcendence through openness to *religious* questions, and their relative willingness to change in the face of the horizons those questions open up. However, especially in light of Tracy's later work (1994), it is both logical and legitimate to extend this basic insight to speak of *theologians'* self-transcendence through openness to *scientific* questions, and their level of readiness to change in response to the challenges and possibilities those questions present. In interdisciplinary religion-and-science contexts, we may say that the contemporary scholar becomes ever more "authentic" by means of an ecstatic, self-transcending openness to the world of the disciplinary other.

Ecstasy also factors into *Plurality and Ambiguity* (1987). Here Tracy argues that interpretation of history and language must take place through dialogues in which "The self finds itself by risking an interpretation of all the signs, symbols and texts of its own and other cultures" (1987, 16). In conversation with the other, writes Tracy, "we find ourselves by losing ourselves in the questioning provoked by the text" (1987, 19). The process of interpretation demands of the scholar a self-consciousness that is able to at once relinquish itself and discover itself in the inherently relational practices of questioning and dialogue.

Tracy suggests that hope emerges as we open ourselves to the unexpected possibilities that emerge through conversation with others. Hope comes as the "gift and threat" of grace; as "a power interrupting our constant temptations to delude ourselves at a level more fundamental than any conscious error; a power gradually but really transforming old habits" (1987, 75). Summing up, for Tracy, it is only as the self is de-centered and relocated in the ecstatic, dynamic spaces of genuine dialogue that it can let go of its need to control the other, and finally "find some authentic freedom by being related to nature, history, others, and even the now transformed self" (1987, 90). This concurrent losing and finding of the self through experiences of alterity holds potential to inform a descriptive account of the twenty-first century scholar's transformations of beliefs and self-understandings that come about whilst engaged in authentic dialogue with disciplinary others.

JAMES W. JONES

We turn next to psychologist and philosopher of religion James W. Jones, whose relational epistemology may be drawn upon to better understand the intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics of fruitful interdisciplinary practice in religion and science.

In several of his works, Jones traces the movement in psychoanalysis away from Freud's isolated and instinctual view of human nature toward a vision of the self as constituted in and through relationships (1991, 1996, 2007). Building on the thought of object relations theorists Heinz Kohut and D.W. Winnicott (among others), Jones argues that in infancy and throughout the lifespan, the healthy self develops and matures not through an innate drive to individuate and disconnect, but rather through intersubjective "self-object" experiences such as mirroring, twinship, and idealization. Such experiences originate in the infant-primary caregiver dyad in early life, and take place in what Jones (following Winnicott) calls the "transitional realm"—that is, the domain of "interaction" or "experiencing." In transitional spaces, harsh dichotomizations between subjectivity/objectivity and inner/outer fade away as the self comes-to-be in the creative give and take of intersubjective encounter.

In his book *Religion and Psychology in Transition* (1996) Jones sets forth a nonreductionistic, post-positivistic epistemology built on the idea that the transitional realm is crucial for understanding the dynamics of human knowing. In facing and being faced, giving voice and giving ear, knowing and being known, we intuit that reality is both found and created: "Human knowing is an active, creative process . . . in which reality is simultaneously discovered and constructed" (1996, 103). This radically relational epistemology highlights the power of the negative and the ecstatic in human selfhood and understanding, and may aid us as we inquire into the factors that go into the shaping of a twenty-first century interdisciplinary consciousness.

We begin with negation. For Jones, experiential knowing requires a certain kind of "letting go"—that is, a relinquishment of the driving obsession for distanciation from and controlling knowledge over the other. In chapter 6 of *Religion and Psychology in Transition* (1996) he discusses both logical and psychological problems associated with ontological reductionism in science—that is, those methodologies that view reality as simply and only "matter in motion," and insist on providing explanatory accounts of phenomena solely in terms of their smallest constituent parts. An ontologically harsh reductionism tends to preclude interdisciplinary engagement in science—especially engagement with religion or theology. For Jones, not only is reductionism fraught with logical difficulties; it is also deeply shaped by the (typically male)[6] psychological need to distanciate from and exercise control over the other whilst refusing to enter the transitional space of experiencing: "Psychologically there appears to be a connection between the cultural values of control and detachment and a fear of subjective experience, especially of emotional experience. Existing outside the perimeters of reason and often threatening to break down our carefully wrought walls of control, affect appears dangerous, chaotic, or threatening. Often its existence is simply denied" (1996, 128).

Thus Jones argues compellingly that the deep psychological drives for autonomy and objectivity, and the closely related fear of emotion, continue to "give a reductionistic methodology an appeal despite its overriding logical difficulties" (1996, 130). A nonreductionistic epistemology able to traverse the religious and scientific disciplines implies a negation of the controlling, detached, un-affected self.

While difficult, this break from the illusion of autonomy and objectivity is precisely the condition that makes possible integrated, nuanced, multi-perspectival ways of understanding ourselves and our world. In the context of our discussion on interdisciplinary consciousness, we may say that it is only by way of a certain "letting go" in the evocative and provocative presence of a disciplinary other that we are able to move beyond the subjective-objective impasse toward nondualistic, multidimensional understanding. To know well, we must risk losing ourselves in meaningful interaction across boundaries—including, of course, disciplinary boundaries. We must become vulnerable to real engagement, real experience, real unknowing, and real loss if we are ever to come to transformative interdisciplinary insight.[7]

For Jones, as with Tracy, the negative losing-of-self is closely connected with the ecstatic finding-of-self. As we give ourselves over to the transitional realm and precariously open ourselves up to relational ways of knowing, we gain access to what Hans Loewald calls the "primary level of mentation." Here knowledge is neither located only "in here" nor only "out there"; rather, relational knowing contains paradoxical elements of *both* subjectivity and objectivity, for it is constituted by an ecstatic dialogical interaction in which truth is both discovered and constructed (Jones 1996, 103).

Near the close of *Religion and Psychology in Transition*, Jones comments explicitly on the promise of a relational epistemology for interdisciplinary engagement:

> [T]he continuity between fields that arises from a relational epistemology is not a reduction of one field to another but a continuity in which disciplinary integrity is preserved. Like persons-in-relation, disciplines-in-relation interact with each other and mutually enrich each other . . . what emerges is an interactive dialogue in which the actual continuities and discontinuities, agreements and disagreements, cannot be predicted in advance. They become apparent only as the dialogue proceeds. (1996, 154)

Summing up, for Jones, the ability to traverse disciplinary lines creatively and constructively requires a negation of the autonomous, controlling consciousness and a concurrent entrance into the unpredictability of ecstatic noetic spaces. Furthermore, ecstatic moments of knowing and being in which the self no longer experiences itself as primarily over-against the other but with and in the other may indeed go beyond the momentary and become ecstatic ways of being in the world wherein the self habitually enters and reenters the transitional domain—the "transforming

psychological space from which renewal and creativity emerge" (Jones 1996, 136). To cultivate a consciousness that consistently dwells within this space—and is thereby able to enter into authentic encounter with disciplinary others whose assumptions, methods, conclusions, and languages differ significantly from one's own—scholars must build their capacity to tolerate (and even embrace) the ambiguity of interdisciplinary alterity. As we have seen, this ambiguity implies the potential for both deep self-loss and profound self-discovery.

Conclusion: Interdisciplinarity as Transformation

Interdisciplinary engagement carries with it deep invitations (perhaps imperatives) for the scholar to attend to his or her own assumptions, prejudices, proclivities, fears, and desires as they factor into conversation with the disciplinary other. Existentially, psychologically, and perhaps even spiritually speaking—one way to view interdisciplinarity is as a call to be transformed.

Tracy's and Jones's works suggest that profound alterations in self-understanding in relation to the other are marked by a concurrent losing-of-self (negation) and finding-of-self (ecstasy). As regards negation, Tracy's work implies that, as interdisciplinary interpreters, we must embrace "self-resistance" by exposing ourselves to the other. We must allow ourselves to be de-centered—to be pushed to the furthest reaches of what we previously deemed doable, thinkable, acceptable, possible. We must lay aside our illusions of autonomous subjectivity and transparent objectivity. We must become dispossessed of our presumed right to decide the meaning of the other's reality even while refusing to fully enter the other's reality. Jones's work implies that we must release our desire for controlling knowledge of (or over) the other. The transitional domain of creative knowing cannot be accessed through calculative and self-enclosed attitudes and postures toward the other. Only when we become vulnerable to emotion, experience, and interaction will we be able to "know" in a way that can responsibly traverse the (often harsh) boundaries between scholarly fields.

As regards ecstasy, Tracy's work implies that precisely in our self-resistance and other-engagement, there emerge moments of dynamic mutual understanding brought on by genuine conversation along with a shared sense of meaning-making that is (inter)subjectively experienced as being both evocative and provocative. In these moments, hope comes as the "gift and threat" of real transformation. Jones's work implies that there is an ecstatic way of being in the world wherein the usual distinctions between inner and outer, subject and object, are no longer constitutive of our basic experience. As interdisciplinary researchers, there may be a way for us to know, act, and become within this dynamic "transitional realm" of interaction and affectivity. Here our knowing of the other is not a knowing *about* the other's reality but rather a knowing *with* and *in dynamic relation*

to the other's reality—a knowing that challenges us and changes us. In these dialogical spaces, selves (as well as ideas) are continually created and re-created, formed and trans-formed, together.

If interdisciplinarity in religion and science is to be truly generative, researchers must open themselves up to the possibility of profound transformations in beliefs, self-understandings, and worldviews. In and through such openness, we may gradually understand ourselves less as apprehensive guardians of ideological dogma, and more as authentic seekers of truth.

Notes

1. Keith Ward, for example, writes: "Religious beliefs cannot remain what they were before the rise of modern science any more than ancient scientific beliefs can. It would be absurd to insist that ancient religious beliefs should remain unchanged when our whole view of the universe has changed radically" (2008, 3).
2. For instance, Michael Ruse (2007), working from the perspective of the philosophy of evolutionary biology, argues for the importance of theology by highlighting that theologians ask important, perennial questions that are generally beyond the scope of what scientists are equipped and willing to treat—e.g., questions related to the meaning of existence and the experience of mystery. On the question of whether a Darwinian can be a Christian, Ruse's answer is, "Absolutely! Is it always easy for a Darwinian to be a Christian? No, but whoever said that the worthwhile things in life are easy?" (2000, 217).
3. See, for example, Barbour (2000), Hefner (2000), McGrath (1998), Murphy and Ellis (1996), Padgett (2003), Peters and Hewlett (2003), Raman (2009), Stenmark (2004), Van Huyssteen (1999), and Wildman (1998).
4. Broadly speaking, this method aims to critically reinterpret both the Christian tradition as well as the contemporary situation, and to bring the two reinterpretations into a mutually critical relation. Tracy's revisionist approach is sometimes associated with Tillich's method of correlation (Tillich 1967). But there is an important difference between the two; whereas for Tillich Christianity provides the answers to the existential questions posed by the human situation, for Tracy, the human situation and the Christian faith both make critical demands on each other. Tillich's correlative relation runs one-way; Tracy's runs both. Thus Tracy's model is often referred to as "critical correlation."
5. For Tracy, "classics" are those texts, images, persons, events, and symbols in a culture that are recognized as having the power to disclose truth (1981, 108–9).
6. A feminist psychoanalytic critique of Freud underlies Jones's argument. Freud's account of the creation of the superego through the resolution of the Oedipus complex is highly gendered; for Freud, the boy's disillusionment with and distanciation from his mother is what makes his autonomy (and his subsequent ability to influence culture) possible. Freud reasoned that, since girls apparently do not experience this separation, they cannot be autonomous culture-shapers to the degree that boys can. In the first chapter of *Religion and Psychology in Transition*, Jones, following feminist psychoanalysis (e.g., Benjamin 1988; Chodorow 1989), turns this argument on its head and makes male (not female) development problematic. Whereas male selfhood emerges through a defensive need for distance and a denial of connection, female selfhood emerges through the maintenance and deepening of empathic connection and attunement, which are precisely the ingredients of healthy ego-formation.
7. It is worth noting that the power of the negative also factors into Jones's *Terror and Transformation* (2002), albeit in a different way. In this book, Jones looks to relational psychoanalytic theories to ask whether or not there can be religion without the kind of psychological idealization of the sacred that would lead to religious infantilism or fanaticism. For Jones, religion without over-idealization is not only possible but also tremendously transformative. He argues that there is a way of relating to the sacred that holds both reverence and realism in tension—that maintains a view toward both the redemptive potential and the incomplete nature of the sacred object, and thus does not promote infantilism or fanaticism through the psychological dynamics of splitting and self-abasement. Jones points to the via

negativa (or the apophatic way) in the Christian tradition as an important example of (and resource for) religious de-idealization. This way often involves pain and mourning over the loss of a cherished view of self, others, and God. However, "Surrendering to the experience of de-idealization and entering the void can also lead the individual to a renewed and transformed religious sensibility and practice that can still contain the now de-idealized symbols and forms" (116). Thus Jones concludes that it is possible to have an idealized and de-idealized religion at the same time, and further, that this dual perspective holds significant redemptive potential. However, it can only be accessed through profound negation.

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