SYMPOSIUM: MICHEL DE CERTEAU

"Practices of 'Unsaying': Michel de Certeau, Spirituality Studies, and Practical Theology"

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Opirituality studies and practical theology share in common a number of features: attention to practices; importance of historical and social context; interdisciplinary methods; concern with cultivating faithful ways of life; interest in appropriation and transformation. At the same time, there are marked differences in emphasis, language, and sensibility. One example: practical theology, long a predominantly Protestant discipline, rarely engages mystical texts or experience, generally preferring hermeneutic philosophy, social science, and ethics as dialogue partners. While some recent writing takes steps to weave spirituality into a framework for practical theology,¹ mysticism generally falls outside the scope of the discourse. Mystical authors and texts, on the other hand, feature prominently in Christian spirituality scholarship, which has been strongly shaped by Catholic authors. Can we traverse this divide between mysticism and practical theology? What fruitful new insights might emerge for both disciplines if we go down this road? What challenges might engagement with mystical texts and experience pose for practical theological methods?

Michel de Certeau (1925–1986) serves as a provocative, if often enigmatic, dialogue partner in this exploration. As an historian, philosopher, theologian, student of psychoanalysis, political commentator, linguist, urban thinker, cultural theorist, and social scientist, de Certeau demonstrates an enormous interdisciplinary range. He also brings a voice shaped by his Catholic, Jesuit formation, however increasingly distant he becomes from that identity. As historian Natalie Zemon Davis writes: "Though in North America Michel de Certeau is known only in the university world, in France he was a celebrity, viewed as a major cultural critic, an innovative historian of early modern religion, and a religious thinker who in his life and work pursued a particularly engaged, open, and generous form of Catholicism."² Hence, conversation with him may offer a contribution as well to the project of articulating distinct Catholic approaches to practical theology.

While de Certeau is known for his influence in spirituality studies, he is less drawn upon as a resource in practical theology, despite his important writing about practice and cultural studies. In this article, I will argue that dialogue with de Certeau's work suggests several significant avenues for dialogue between spirituality studies and practical theology. De Certeau's analyses of the practices of everyday life could well draw spirituality studies to greater attention to quotidian practice as the locus of our study. In this case, practical theologians would be natural interlocutors for spirituality scholars. Drawing upon de Certeau's description of mysticism as social practice, I make a case for why practical theology, which typically has not engaged mystical texts, should do so. De Certeau's analysis of the reading of historical texts, moreover, complexifies the tasks of appropriation and transformation that are integral to both practical theology and spirituality studies. Finally, I assert that his analysis of "mystic speech" and "practices of unsaying" suggest a needed corrective to practical theological method and discourse. While I raise some critical questions about the relationship between "unsaying" and prophetic voice, I follow David Tracy and others in arguing for the continuing development of a "mystical-prophetic" practical theology.



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TRANSFORMATIVE APPROPRIATION

Spirituality studies are often described as self-implicating, leaving the scholar, teacher, and student vulnerable to transformation. Some have described an "appropriative method" in spirituality studies.³ So too, practical theology is concerned, among other things, with critical and transformative appropriation of historical traditions in and for contemporary contexts. As one moves from descriptive theology to historical theology within Don S. Browning's four movements of a fundamental practical theology, for example, one asks: "What do the normative texts that are already part of our effective history really imply for our praxis when they are confronted as honestly as possible?"⁴ According to Browning, this hermeneutical dialogue between the contemporary situation and historical tradition aims to guide action "toward social and individual transformation."⁵

De Certeau, however, problematizes the reading of history and historical texts, pointing to the rupture, ambiguity, excessiveness of the mystical experience in history. There is no simple act of translation or appropriation, as there is no simple act of reading religious experience in history. As the papers in this symposium demonstrate, de Certeau's "sciences of the other" raise important questions about the reading of history, the elusive nature of religious speech, mystic poetics, and the wandering of "perpetual departure." In her article, for example, Brenna Moore notes that de Certeau once described Christian mysticism as the practice of "awakening the dead for integration with the present," and claimed that secular history, on the other hand, entailed distancing, "calming the dead," ensuring that the past never intrudes into the present. Unlike his teacher Henri de Lubac, Moore claims, de Certeau grew increasingly skeptical about the possibility of awakening the dead.

These sorts of questions have significant implications for an appropriative method that aims to correlate tradition and situation with the aim of shaping and animating contemporary practice. Can the past be integrated in a lifegiving way in the present? How do we need to think about this appropriative task, which is critical to the ongoing life of faith communities and traditions? While practical theologians are attentive to the complexity of the hermeneutical process, an engagement with *mystical* texts in history, following de Certeau, prompts new and even more complicated explorations of the dialogical venture. How does an "unsaying" text participate in such conversation? Might the practical theologian need a different kind of hermeneutical skill or sensibility in reading these texts in all their otherness and unique way of working with/playing with/creating/practicing language? De Certeau's discussion of our relationship with mystical texts from the past—one that he describes in terms of exile, nostalgia, and irreducible difference—raises unsettling questions for any of us accustomed to the fourfold movement of practical theology, with

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its plunge into historical theology and surfacing with systematic theological nuggets and transformative strategies to guide contemporary practice. When it comes to mystical texts the hermeneutical "conversation" is more elusive, fragmented, riddled, and silent than perhaps practical theologians have envisioned.

Practices of Everyday Life, Mysticism as Practice

In his book The Practices of Everyday Life, de Certeau examines the mechanisms of "la perruque" in ordinary culture-practices of resistance built into everyday operations of consumers. Rather than being merely passive within dominant systems and spaces of production, in fact consumers adopt a bricolage of *tactics* that interject "different interests and desires" into that space. De Certeau distinguishes these tactics, a kind of "making do" on the part of the weak, from strategies, the assertion by an entity with power and will of a "place that can be delimited as its own."6 He examines this distinction between strategies and tactics in a range of "everyday practices," including speech, walking in the city, and reading, which he describes as "poaching." In walking in the city, for example, one adopts to a certain degree the topographical landscape created and reflected in maps. Yet, the pedestrian also improvises-creating shortcuts and detours, going here and not there, as de Certeau puts it-and so "transform[s] or abandon[s] spatial elements." 7 His analysis of everyday practices could well inform a turn to the quotidian in spirituality studies, which risks overemphasizing extraordinary experience and heroic spiritualities. While sociologists have done much to consider spirituality in everyday life, and some spirituality scholars have looked to family, nature, and city as key loci of spirituality, quotidian practice is still an area ripe for study, particularly from a theological approach.8 Here practical theologians would be useful interlocutors, as they have well developed theological theories of practice, culture, and context upon which to draw.9

In some ways similar to his discussion of everyday practices, de Certeau describes mysticism in terms of practice. Indeed, he perceives the priority of practice as the precondition for doctrine in his reading of sixteenth and seventeenth century mysticism, a special interest of his. De Certeau writes that in this mysticism, practices precede, create the conditions for, doctrine: "What is essential, then, is not a body of doctrines (which was on the contrary the effect of their practices, and, especially, the product of later theological interpretations), but the epistemic foundation of a domain within which specific procedures are followed: a new space, with new mechanisms."¹⁰ De Certeau notes that sixteenth and seventeenth century mysticism arose in a "shattered Christendom" and within that larger condition of loss, most mystics also came from marginalized social groups, such as the *conversos* in Spain, or from communities ravaged by war, economic hardship, and social change.¹¹ In a sense,

then, mystical tactics (procedures, practices, ways of acting) allow for the creation of new language and new space: "The mystics' reinterpretation of the tradition is characterized by a set of procedures allowing a new treatment of language-of all contemporary language, not only the area delimited by theological knowledge or the corpus of patristic and scriptural works. It is ways of acting that guide the creation of a body of mystical writings."12 Practice precedes text; doctrine follows practice. Further complicating the relationship between doctrine and practice, de Certeau highlights *believing* as a *practice*. He understands "belief" not as a thing, a doctrine or proposition, but as an act: "... I take 'belief' to mean not what is believed (a dogma, a programme, etc.), but the investiture of subjects in a proposition, the act of uttering it while holding it to be true—in other words, a 'modality' of the affirmation rather than its content."¹³ De Certeau's analysis certainly suggests that a theory-topractice application model was never adequate to mystical modes of acting. The practical theological insight of the 1980s finds deep echoes in the history of Christian spirituality.

De Certeau does use the category of "experience" as well in describing mysticism: "it is defined by the establishment of a place (the "I") and by transactions (spirit); that is, by the necessary relation between the subject and the messages. The term 'experience' connotes this relation."14 What is significant for our discussion is his mingling of the terms "experience" and "practice" in his discussion of mysticism and the fact that he clearly describes mysticism as a practice, and a social practice at that. As Philip Sheldrake argues: "his understanding of "mysticism" is always as a social rather than a purely personal, interior reality.... Mysticism is social not merely passively (that is, by being a reflection of a particular historical context) but also *actively* in that it affects and transforms the world and even self-consciously in that the major mystics set out to create new forms of discourse and new religious groups."15 De Certeau's work here may help to clarify discussions about whether "experience" or "practice" is the object of spirituality study, about which there is a range of opinion in spirituality scholarship.¹⁶ So also in practical theology: while "practice" is a dominant category, authors such as Hans-Günter Heimbrock, Poling and Miller, and Ruard Ganzevoort appeal to "experience" or "lived religion" as the focus of study in practical theology. So too Latina scholars such as Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, Nancy Pineda-Madrid, and Carmen Nanko-Fernandez point to lo cotidiano (which Pineda-Madrid calls "everyday life and experience") as source and center of theologizing.¹⁷ De Certeau's reading of sixteenth and seventeenth century mysticism makes clear that religious experience and practice are not mutually exclusive categories. Mysticism is not only interior experience but also social practice. De Certeau thus locates mysticism in terms familiar to practical theologians. If indeed mysticism is a social practice, surely

it is one upon which practical theology should reflect. This entails looking, for example, at the relationship between mysticism and social transformation, the shaping of faith communities, the formation of classic texts, religious leader-ship, and the dynamics of shaping a faithful way of life.¹⁸

PRACTICES OF "UNSAYING"

In reflecting on mysticism as practice, one must attend to the "practices of unsaying" that are integral to mystical discourse. In so doing, theology may open more to diverse forms of expression that point to what cannot be contained in language. De Certeau lamented the eclipsing of silence in a media culture, which distorts the practice of believing: "Nowadays there are too many objects for belief and not enough credibility. . . . The media change the profound silence of things into its opposite. Once constituted in secret, the real now jabbers away."¹⁹ Here is not only sharp cultural critique, but perhaps also by extension, I would suggest, a warning for jabbering theologians: Where in all our "saying" is the profound silence of things? How do words eclipse or reveal the real?

De Certeau identifies a modern quest that is, I think, still relevant and challenging to all manner of theology: "the quest to discern in our earthly, fallen language the now inaudible Word of God."²⁰ Mysticism, in de Certeau's understanding, points to what is not known, cannot be said. Sheldrake notes: "Precisely because mystical language tentatively engages with the absolute, it can only 'say' what is absolute or unbounded by, in de Certeau's words, 'erasing itself."²¹

De Certeau closely linked mysticism and poetics, with its strangeness, "excess of fire," "deconstructing meaning and making it music." By "saying nothing," the poem "permits saying."22 So too contemporary spirituality scholars continue to explore the practice of words-hearing the word, speaking a word from the margins, praying the word, writing what cannot be written, bearing the cost of words. Douglas Burton-Christie discusses the "cost of interpretation" in early monasticism, "the pervasive sense among the monks that language . . . had real power. . . . To interpret a word meant striving to somehow realize it in one's life and to be transformed by that realization."23 Here there is resonance with de Certeau, who writes: "It is by taking words seriously, a life and death game in the body of language, that the secret of what they give is torn from them . . . "24 Bernard McGinn, tracing the language of "inner experience" and its critics within the traditions of Christian mysticism, writes: "This can serve to remind us that to speak of inner experience of God is just another example of the impossible but necessary task of all speaking about the unknowable God-an inherently contradictory activity, as mystics

of many traditions have insisted."²⁵ Mark Burrows draws upon de Certeau, Charles Winquist, and "apophatic[ally] eloquent" poets such as Rilke, Stevens, and Eliot, to move toward poetics as integral to theological thinking and writing: "An unpoetical theology renders the spiritual life as a largely verbal technique... Poetics points through language toward the inarticulate, toward a transcendence not *beyond* but *within* speech."²⁶

This attention to practices of unsaying and the potentially transformative power of words is less prominent in practical theology, although there is some recent movement among both Protestant and Catholic scholars toward narrative theology, poetics, and aesthetics that is important to note. Heather Walton makes important contributions in relating poetics and practical theology. She also highlights Rebecca Chopp's attention to the "poetics of testimony," which, according to Walton, "is concerned with those aspects of human life that cannot be addressed at all within our usual registers and are currently 'unspeakable."27 Pamela Couture questions why "pastoral theology has been strangely absent" from discussions of theology and the arts. She asserts that the traditionally strong connections between pastoral theology and ethics and pastoral theologians' drive for "institutional legitimacy" have led scholars to neglect the arts as a significant part of their theoretical work.²⁸ German Catholic practical theologian Norbert Mette points to the need for "the conceptual development of a practical theological theory of action which explicitly includes the aesthetic dimension," as he also critiques a false pitting of an aesthetic approach from an understanding of practical theology as a science of action (the aesthetic dimension is, rather, "a constitutive moment of human action").²⁹ Latino Catholic scholar Roberto Goizueta argues that Latin American and U.S. Hispanic intellectual traditions emphasize "aesthetics, or aesthetic experience, as a key category for interpreting human action"—an important corrective to more instrumentalist understandings of praxis.³⁰ One also can note Catholic practical theologian Terry Veling's imaginative reading of practical theology as "dwelling poetically in the world."³¹

Scholarship in practical theology then tends to prioritize theological argumentation and reasoned discourse, although there is some significant restlessness with the limitations of these modes of doing theology. Attention to alternate forms of expression, including poetics and practices of "unsaying" as modes of theological discourse, could contribute richly to practical theology and could be a critical point of dialogue between practical theology and spirituality studies.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF PRACTICAL THEOLOGY: OWARD A MYSTICAL-PROPHETIC PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

This discussion has implications for the formation of the practical theologian. How can the practical theologian read mystical texts without ears attuned deeply to both silence and the power of words, without ears to hear poetry, to hear how words say and "unsay"? Where—in our doctoral work, in collegial mentoring, in the pressures of the tenure clock and the hectic pace of academic culture—do we learn to write poetically, to contemplate, to practice saying and unsaying? Theology that seeks to be transformative needs to develop imagination and methods of listening to distant texts from the tradition, listening to and playing with words that "unspeak" what they seek to reveal. As Sheldrake notes in a discussion about the potential of mysticism to renew theology: "The mystical tradition in fact invites theologians to cultivate a degree of conceptual 'silence' and to re-engage their analysis with contemplation and imagination."³² How might our words "unsay," hold within themselves a silence that effaces speech? Can such a practice (tactic?) be possible within the dominating structures (strategies?) of academic theology?

Drawing upon de Certeau in dialogue with spirituality studies and developing work in practical theology opens up these interesting paths of exploration. However, I also would raise a critical question about the potentially liberating and potentially oppressive risks of "practices of unsaying." As marginal practice, mysticism and mystical writing stands to confront power, authority, and self-congratulatory certainty. At its best, mysticism is liberative—in the words of Catholic theologian M. Shawn Copeland, mysticism entails, like all holy paths, "keen attentiveness to the situations of human others and of the world. . ."; mystics seek to "enlarge consciousness and horizon, to include rather than exclude all creation."³³ And yet, feminist, womanist, and Latina authors also remind us that the mystical path entails a complicated journey; talk of the "no-self," the self being absorbed into the Other . . . this is fraught with danger in Nancy Pineda-Madrid's words, " in light of the many who know a world set on curing them of the 'sin of being.'"³⁴ Similarly, I would ask: when do "practices of unsaying" risk undermining a prophetic voice?

David Tracy's address to the International Academy of Practical Theology in 2009 aptly expressed the deep intuition that mysticism, aesthetics, and prophecy cannot be separated: "The emphasis on the ethical-political in contemporary practical theology continues the prophetic center of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. At the same time, however, I now wish I had also emphasized in that early article [1983] a further need for correlational practical theology: a theological correlation with the aesthetic, the contemplativemetaphysical and the several spiritual traditions of Christianity." We have yet to realize this vision of an "aesthetic-ethical correlation" toward the end

of developing not simply prophetic but rather "mystical-prophetic practical theologies."³⁵ I suggest that this vision is well worth speaking and "unsaying" into being.

NOTES

- I would note Dorothy Bass' work on practices of faith, Kathleen Cahalan and James Nieman's definition of practical theology in terms of Christian discipleship, and Rick Osmer's descriptions of the four movements of practical theology, including his framing of descriptive-empirical work in terms of "priestly listening," "attending," and a "spirituality of presence." See Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2008), 31–41. See too Claire Wolfteich, "Animating Questions: Spirituality and Practical Theology," *International Journal of Practical Theology*, vol.13 (2009): 121–143. I thank my doctoral students in Practical Theology and Spirituality Studies at Boston University, and particularly Tara Soughers, for advancing my thinking on the relationship between mysticism and practical theology.
- 2. Natalie Zemon Davis, "The Quest of Michel de Certeau," *The New York Review of Books* (May 15, 2008).
- 3. Michael Downey, "Appropriative Method," in Philip Sheldrake, ed., *The New Westminster Dictionary of Spirituality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 122.
- 4. Don S. Browning, A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991), 49.
- 5. Browning, A Fundamental Practical Theology, 36.
- Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, c1984), 29–36.
- 7. De Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, 98.
- 8. For sociological treatments of everyday religion and popular piety, see work by Nancy Ammerman, Robert Orsi, Meredith McGuire, and Robert Bellah. See, for example, Ammerman, *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Wendy Wright, Beldan Lane, and Philip Sheldrake provide examples of more theological approaches cited above. See, for example, Wendy M. Wright, *Sacred Dwelling: An Everyday Family Spirituality* (Boston: Pauline Books, 2007). On the dangers of overemphasizing "spiritual classics", see Arthur Holder, "The Problem with 'Spiritual Classics'," *Spiritus* 10.1 (2010): 22–37.
- 9. There are many examples of such scholarship. See, for instance, Elaine Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2002) and Dorothy Bass and Miroslav Volf, eds., *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2001).
- 10. De Certeau, "Mystic Speech," in Graham Ward, ed., *The Certeau Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 188–189.
- 11. De Certeau, "Mystic Speech," 193, 191.
- 12. De Certeau, "Mystic Speech," 189.
- 13. De Certeau, "Believing and Making People Believe," in *The Certeau Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 120.
- 14. De Certeau, "Mystic Speech," 196.
- 15. Philip Sheldrake, *Explorations in Spirituality: History, Theology, and Social Practice* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2010), 118.
- 16. For discussions of these terms, see Elizabeth Liebert, "The Role of Practice in the Study of Christian Spirituality" (in which she draws upon both the categories of "practice" and "experience") and Philip Sheldrake, "Christian Spirituality as a Way of Living Publicly" (in which he emphasizes spirituality as publicly engaged practice), both in Dreyer

and Burrows, eds., *Minding the Spirit: A Study of Christian Spirituality* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 79–99 and 282–298 respectively. Sandra Schneiders, on the other hand, calls "spiritual life as experience" the object of the study of spirituality. See Sandra Schneiders, "A Hermeneutical Approach to the Study of Spirituality," in Dreyer and Burrows, eds., *Minding the Spirit: A Study of Christian Spirituality* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 50.

- See, for example, R. Ruard Ganzevoort, "Forks in the Road When Tracing the Sacred: Practical Theology as the Hermeneutics of Lived Religion," IAPT Presidential Address, 2009; Nancy Pineda-Madrid, "On Mysticism, Latinas/os, and the Journey: A Reflection in Conversation with Mary Engel," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24.2 (2008): 178; Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 66–73.
- Spirituality scholarship offers substantial resources along these lines. See, for example, Bernard McGinn's important multi-volume series on mysticism (New York: Crossroad Publishing) and Janet K. Ruffing, ed., *Mysticism and Social Transformation* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001).
- 19. Michel De Certeau, "Believing and Making People Believe," in Graham Ward, ed., *The Certeau Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 124.
- 20. De Certeau, "Mystic Speech," 194.
- 21. Phillip Sheldrake, *Explorations in Spirituality: History, Theology, and Social Practice*, 116.
- 22. De Certeau, "Mystic Speech," 203-204.
- Douglas Burton-Christie, "The Cost of Interpretation: Sacred Texts and Ascetic Practice in Desert Spirituality," in Dreyer and Burrows, eds., *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004),, 100. See too Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
- 24. De Certeau, "Mystic Speech," 205.
- 25. Bernard McGinn, "The Language of Inner Experience in Christian Mysticism," in Dreyer and Burrows, eds., *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004),147.
- 26. Mark Burrows, "Mysticism, Poetics, and the Unlanguageable," in Dreyer and Burrows, eds., *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 342–343, 351.
- 27. Heather Walton, "Practical Theology and Poetics," in Bonnie Miller-McLemore, ed., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2012).
- Pamela D. Couture, "Pastoral Theology as Art," in Bonnie J. Miller McLemore and Brita L. Gill-Austern, *Feminist & Womanist Pastoral Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 169–187.
- Norbert Mette, "Practical Theology: Theory of Aesthetics or Theory of Action?" in Paul Ballard and Pamela Couture, eds., *Creativity, Imagination, and Criticism: The Expressive Dimension in Practical Theology* (Cardiff: Cardiff Academic Press, 2001), 61. See too discussion in Robert Mager, "Action Theories" in Miller-McLemore, ed., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2012).
- 30. Roberto S. Goizueta, *Caminemos Con Jésus* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis 1995), see for example, 89.
- 31. Terry A. Veling, *Practical Theology: On Earth As It Is In Heaven* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2005).

- 32. Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology: Christian Living and the Doctrine of God* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998), 100.
- 33. M. Shawn Copeland, "Liberating Life," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24.2 (2008): 168.
- Nancy Pineda-Madrid, "On Mysticism, Latinas/os, and the Journey: A Reflection in Conversation with Mary Engel," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24.2 (2008): 179.
- 35. David Tracy, "A Correlational Model of Practical Theology Revisited," in Edward Foley, ed., *Religion, Diversity and Conflict* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2011), 49, 50.