

EXISTENTIALISM IN THE THOUGHT OF BULTMANN AND TILLICH

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Two of the most controversial and provocative writers in our time have been the German-born theologians, Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich. Their writings reflect the strong influence of, and give impetus to, the movement called "existentialism"—a word that is frequently used and variously defined in recent years. It should not be inferred, however, that both men share the same point of view. Bultmann, for example, has criticized Tillich's view as less Christological and more philosophical, while one critic observes that Bultmann promotes independence of all philosophy, with the exception of existentialism.

Bultmann very readily fits into the category of the existentialists, since his theology may be regarded as a synthesis of elements from Søren Kierkegaard, the "father" of present-day existentialism, and Martin Heidegger, his atheistic colleague for many years at the University of Marburg. Bultmann states quite frankly that an existentialist interpretation of the Bible is the only solution whereby the Christian faith can become understandable and acceptable to modern man.¹ He calls his principle of biblical interpretation "*existential hermeneutics* . . . because the Bible is found to appeal to the same dimensions of depth and self-understanding in men to which existential philosophy appeals."²

It is more difficult to classify Tillich theologically, though he is often called an existentialist—a characterization which he has

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1. Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. Werner Bartsch (London: SPCK, 1953), p. 15.
 2. Carl Michalson, "Rudolf Bultmann," in *Ten Makers of Modern Protestant Thought*, ed. Geroge L. Hunt (New York: Association Press, 1958), p. 104.

personally affirmed³ and rejected.⁴ Walter Leibrecht states that Tillich has become "the theologian for Everyman in the predicament of his existence."⁵ He observes that Tillich is an *ontologist* inquiring into the meaning of Being, an *existentialist* exploring man's anxiety about the meaningfulness of his own existence, an *idealist* who sees man's spiritual problem as calling for a return of the soul from estrangement to its true essence, and a *romanticist* who uses his creative spirit to re-interpret the symbols of traditional religion in an effort to make their truth meaningful to the perplexed.⁶ Actually Tillich prefers to call himself an "ecstatic naturalist," stating emphatically that ". . . I have fought supranaturalism from my early writings on, not in order to support naturalism but because I tried to overcome the alternative between naturalism and supranaturalism."⁷

Notwithstanding the divergent views of Bultmann and Tillich, there are a number of similarities between the two scholars. A strong existentialist element is evident, for example, in that both reject any knowledge of God that is objective to personal decision. Respecting anthropology, Bultmann says Tillich and he concur. Both men have sharply accommodated Christianity to a modern philosophy of science. Both scholars are known for their antipathy to the supernatural element in the Christian faith. The tendency of both, however, is to be more biblical and theological in their sermons than in their systematic theology.⁸ The theology of Bultmann

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3. "His classification as an existentialist is much less clear. Nevertheless, there seem to be good reasons for placing him under this heading, especially since he sometimes classifies himself in this way." John B. Cobb, Jr., *Living Options in Protestant Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), p. 259. This is an observation from Paul Tillich's article, "Metaphysics and Theology," in *Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 10, 1956, p. 63.
 4. ". . . I can only pose the question of a possible philosophical foundation for psychotherapy on the basis of my own thought, in which the existential element has a definite place, although I would not call myself an existentialist." "Existentialism, Psychotherapy, and the Nature of Man," in *Pastoral Psychology*, Vol. 11, No. 105, June, 1960, p. 10.
 5. "The Life and Mind of Paul Tillich," in *Religion and Culture, Essays in Honor of Paul Tillich*, ed. Walter Leibrecht (New York: Harper, 1959), p. 10.
 6. *Ibid.*, pp. 5-7.
 7. "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism," *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, eds. Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (New York: Macmillan, 1952), p. 341. Cf. Walter Leibrecht, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
 8. E. G., Rudolf Bultmann, *This World and the Beyond* ([Marburg Sermons] New York: Scribner, 1960); Paul Tillich, *The New Being* (New York: Scribner, 1955); Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now* (New York: Scribner, 1963).

reflects elements from Kierkegaard and Heidegger, as we have already noted, and while Tillich's thought reflects the influence of both of these men, they are less determinative for him.

EXISTENTIALISM: ITS MEANING AND ISSUES

Existentialism has been described as "a method of interpreting life which is based upon an attitude of seriousness in living."⁹ It makes man central to its method and is also often called a philosophical anthropology. Because man alone is the highly specialized kind of reality called existence, existentialism is sometimes referred to as a humanism (Sartre) or a personalism (Mounier and Berdyaev). It is a mode of thought and decision which concerns not the intellect merely, but the whole personality. "To think existentially, therefore, is to think not as a spectator of the ultimate issues of life and death, but as one who is committed to a decision upon them."¹⁰ As a religious philosophy, existentialism seeks to discover the character and meaning of existence (Being) itself.

Tillich admits that "theology has received tremendous gifts from existentialism, . . . gifts not dreamed of fifty years ago or even thirty years ago."¹¹ He does not enumerate these gifts fully in this context, but we can note at this point some of the major emphases or issues of existentialism, many of which are discernible in the theology of Bultmann and Tillich. Existentialism begins from the situation of the existing individual, since the term basically implies the primacy of existence over essence. Closely allied with the stress upon the individual is the concept of finite freedom. Prominence is also given to the element of tragedy in human existence, with a further emphasis on the concept of Dread, or Anguish. The subjectivity of all truth is highly significant for existentialists. The homelessness of the human spirit, the concept of Nothingness, the concept of "Authentic Existence," and the significance of the "present moment," the "eternal now," are further issues of existentialism. Finally, death as an existential phenomenon is emphasized. To several of these existential issues in the thought of Bultmann and Tillich we now turn our attention.

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9. *Christianity and the Existentialists*, ed. Carl Michalson (New York: Scribner, 1956), p. 17.
 10. Hugh Ross Mackintosh, *Types of Modern Theology* (London: Nisbet and Co., Ltd., 1937), p. 219.
 11. Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, ed. R. C. Kimball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 126.

Man and Finite Freedom

Classic theology begins and ends with God. Modern man begins and ends with himself. Tillich endeavors to meet modern man half way; he begins with man, and attempts to end with God. Very central to his theological approach is the "method of correlation," and Tillich frankly states that

systematic theology proceeds in the following way: it makes an analysis of the human situation out of which the existential questions arise, and it demonstrates that the symbols used in the Christian message are the answers to these questions. The analysis of the human situation is done in terms which today are called "existential."¹²

Within the existentialist framework, "existence" and "existential" are terms which apply only to men, not to concrete things. Though Tillich moves beyond existence to ontology, his starting point is man. As David E. Roberts points out:

The doctrine of man is clearly central in Paul Tillich's theology. Each of the five parts of his system begins with an analysis of human existence (and existence generally) as the basis for developing a theological question. Taken together, these passages constitute an integral interpretation covering (1) human rationality, (2) human finitude, (3) human sin, (4) man's living unity, and (5) human destiny. The content of the five corresponding answers—Revelation, God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Kingdom of God—cannot be derived from the questions, but their form is conditioned by the fact that they must be relevant to the manner in which the questions are being asked.¹³

It should be noted that man's existence for Tillich is not in isolation but in relation to the world in which he exists. As Roberts asserts, "The basic starting point, in Tillich's thought, both for anthropology and ontology, is man's awareness of the self-world correlation."¹⁴ We can understand life and the world only from the point of view of our own individual, personal life.

Similarly, in Bultmann's approach to the Christian faith the pivotal point is man. He believes "man's life is moved by the search for God because it is always moved, consciously or unconsciously, by the question about his own personal existence. The

12. Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), I, 62.

13. Kegley and Bretall, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

question of God and the question of myself are identical."¹⁵ In reply to Karl Barth's charge that Bultmann was "substituting anthropology for theology," Bultmann heartily agrees: "I *am* trying to substitute anthropology for theology, for I am interpreting theological affirmations as assertions about human life. What I mean is that the God of the Christian revelation is the answer to the vital questions."¹⁶ His statement that to talk about God is also to talk about man has been cited as putting a question mark concerning the transcendence of God, and Bultmann has sought to clarify his meaning. "From the statement that to speak of God is to speak of myself, it by no means follows that God is not outside the believer. This would be the case only if faith is interpreted as a purely psychological event."¹⁷ While granting that God has an existence independent of man, in Bultmann's theology it must be noted that the place where God acts is in human existence, which means in human experience. "We must speak of God as acting only in the sense that He acts with me here and now . . ."¹⁸

Bultmann further insists that our understanding of God is bound up with self-understanding. Accordingly, he declares that

the most important thing is that basic insight that the theological thoughts of the New Testament are the unfolding of faith itself growing out of that new understanding of God, the world, and man which is conferred in and by faith—or, as it can also be phrased: *out of one's new self-understanding*.¹⁹

By this Bultmann means "an existential understanding of myself which is at one with and inseparable from my understanding of God and the World."²⁰ Anthropology stands at the central point of Bultmann's theological concern. Man is both the starting point and center of his thought.

Existentialists are anxious to safeguard and to develop the inner freedom of the individual person. Unitedly they oppose the two extremes which have dominated philosophical discussions of the problem of freedom, namely, a form of determinism which is incompatible with the conditioned character of human existence. For this reason, "existentialists agree that man is both free and enslaved, but the enslavement which they acknowledge and which

15. Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Scribner, 1958), p. 53.

16. Bartsch, *op. cit.*, "A Reply to the Theses of J. Schniewind," pp. 107, 108.

17. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology, op. cit.*, p. 70.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

19. *Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Scribner, 1955), II, 239.

20. *Ibid.*

they seek to overcome is of a kind which could only befall free beings.’’²¹

Tillich affirms man’s freedom. “Man is man because he has freedom, but he has freedom only in polar interdependence with destiny.’’²² Man’s “fall” involves the actualization of finite freedom within tragic destiny. God is infinite freedom, man is finite freedom. Man’s finite freedom makes possible the transition from essence to existence. When man becomes anxiously aware of his finite freedom, he experiences a desire to make his freedom an actuality. Universally man decides for the actualization of his freedom and falls into estranged existence.²³

Sin is not only ostentation, but self-will, says Bultmann. Repentance means returning to God from the isolation of self-will²⁴ The inner dividedness which Paul describes in the latter part of Romans 7 means that man himself destroys his true self.²⁵ Release comes through the obedience of faith, and “the new self-understanding which is bestowed with ‘faith’ is that of *freedom*, in which the believer gains life and thereby his own self.”²⁶

Estrangement, Anxiety, and Despair

In Kierkegaard’s view there is an infinite abyss between God, the Holy One, and man, the sinner. The matrix of sin is fear; psychologically, it springs from dread or anxiety. Despair, which is taken by Kierkegaard as the virtual equivalent of sin, is a universal condition. Every living man is in some degree the victim of despair. Men fear or dread when they hear the challenge of eternity, the call to be spiritual. They despair when they refuse that call. There is “no man in whose inner life there does not dwell an unrest, a dispeace, a disharmony, the dread of something unknown, of something on which he dare not look, a dread of the possibilities of his own being, a dread of himself.”²⁷

21. David E. Roberts, “Faith and Freedom in Existentialism” [a study of Kierkegaard and Sartre], *Theology Today* (January, 1952), VIII, 471.

22. *Systematic Theology*, I, 182.

23. *Ibid.*, II, 29ff. Cf. Kegley and Bretall, *op. cit.*, pp. 117-120.

24. Rudolf Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1956), pp. 54, 55.

25. *Systematic Theology*, I, 245.

26. *Ibid.*, 331.

27. Mackintosh, *op. cit.*, p. 237. Chapter on “The Theology of Paradox” (Søren Kierkegaard).

These various existentialist factors in man's experience are developed at length by Paul Tillich in his *Systematic Theology*²⁸ and in his book *The Courage to Be*.²⁹ A summary of these salient factors should be noted. For Tillich, the possibility of transition from dreaming innocence to existence is experienced as temptation. It presupposes finite freedom. Temptation also presupposes want and desire, man's desire to actualize or fulfill his potentialities. It is a state of anxiety or indecision—the anxiety of deciding whether to preserve his innocence or whether to experience actuality through knowledge, power, and guilt. It is man's desire to remove himself from the divine center and to make himself existentially the center of himself and his world in his search for fulfillment.

Estrangement is the result of the transition from essence to existence, the condition in which man finds himself after the "fall." The "fall" does not refer to a specific event in history, but is a symbol of the universal predicament of man and points to the gap between what he is and what he ought to be. Man's "fall" involves the actualization of finite freedom within tragic destiny. Estrangement is expressed as unbelief, the turning of the total self away from God; as *hubris*, the elevation of the self to the center of life; and as concupiscence, the unlimited desire to draw the whole of one's world into oneself. The desire for knowledge, sex, wealth, and power are symptoms of concupiscence when they have an unlimited character. Love, on the other hand, strives for the reunion of the separated, and for Tillich, is the opposite of estrangement.

Closely allied to the factor of estrangement is "anxiety," or "the existential awareness of nonbeing."³⁰ It arises out of an awareness of being finite and conditioned, and expresses the awareness of being limited in time (since men must die), space, casuality, and substance. Anxiety should not be confused with fear, though the two are inseparable. Fear has a definite object, such as pain, danger, and enemies, and can be conquered by action. Anxiety can be overcome or absorbed by courage which man receives through heritage and through reunion with God. The basic anxiety, the anxiety of a finite being about the threat of nonbeing, cannot be eliminated, says Tillich. It belongs to existence itself.³¹ Tillich distinguishes three forms of anxiety: (1) the anxiety of death (2) the anxiety of meaninglessness, and (3) the anxiety of condemnation.³²

28. *Systematic Theology*, II, 29-78.

29. Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), pp. 32-85.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 41ff.

At best, life must be lived in tension, and appears to issue in existential anxiety rather than Christian assurance.

The three types of anxiety are interwoven in such a manner that one of them gives the predominant color, but all of them participate in the coloring of the state of anxiety. They are fulfilled in the situation of despair. Despair is an ultimate or "boundary-line" situation, the final consequence or index of man's existence in estrangement.³³ It is the point where man has come to the end of his possibilities. It signifies the state of inescapable conflict between what man essentially is and ought to be, and what he actually is and cannot help ("without hope"; "no exit"). It is also the state of meaninglessness leading to paths of self-destruction in a vain attempt to escape (suicide). In despair, God is experienced as standing against man in "wrath" and "condemnation."³⁴

The Subjectivity of Truth

The principle of spiritual inwardness, or subjectivity as it is often called, had a determinative influence on all of Kierkegaard's thinking. For him, truth is subjectivity, as subjectivity is truth. This does not mean that he denied objectively encountered reality. He simply meant that coldly objective, abstract thinking counts for nothing by itself. As Kierkegaard expressed it in one of his most famous dictums, "Only the truth that edifies is truth for thee."

The mood of Kierkegaard has pervaded contemporary existentialism. It has been carried to extreme forms of radical subjectivism. Paul Tillich and Rudolf Bultmann have helped to prepare the way for these radical forms by their excessive stress upon subjectivity. Less than a year prior to Paul Tillich's death, this writer heard the renowned theologian lecture at Transylvania College on the subject, "Absolute and Relative Elements in Moral Decisions." Tillich insisted emphatically that the source of a moral decision lies in one's individual essence. "This approach," he said, "means that the individual must reject attempts to derive absolute values from other sources, such as fear, expediency, social convention or arbitrary earthly or heavenly authorities." Furthermore, "if it [a moral commandment] comes from outside our essential being we have the right to contradict it . . . Tell the young who seek moral guidance that on the basis of a concrete situation, they are free from any

33. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

formulated law." Tillich also emphasized that "God's will is expressed in our essential being, our created goodness," and for that reason "individual essence does not conflict with the notion of obedience of God's will."³⁵ These opinions from the high priest of American theology stress subjectivity with a vengeance, and are in sharp disjunction with the scriptural stress upon the corruption of the human heart.

Tillich helped to spawn the radical views of Bishop John A. T. Robinson in *Honest to God* and the "God-is-dead" theologians by suggesting that the very name "God" may have to be abandoned in order to make room for and to understand a new concept for God. He writes:

The name of this infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being is *God*. That depth is what the word *God* means. And if that word has not much meaning for you, translate it, and speak of the depths of your life, of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, of what you take seriously without any reservation. Perhaps, in order to do so, you must forget everything traditional that you have learned about God, perhaps even that word itself.³⁶

There is more than a touch of irony in the circumstances leading to the death of Paul Tillich last fall when one of the young "God-is-dead" professors assured Tillich in a personal confrontation, "You are our father; you have made us what we are." Tillich's ontological conception of God as being-itself tends to depersonalize Deity. Furthermore, he assures us that the personal God of Theism is a symbol only. A critic's pointed question seems very pertinent:

Since we can only know God through religious symbols, and since the validity and truth of these symbols can in no way be judged by any ontological fact but only by human experience and its needs, why do we require the ontological reference at all?³⁷

The element of subjectivity can be observed in Bultmann's view of history. He writes:

The meaning of history lies always in the present, and when the present is conceived as the eschatological present by Christian faith the meaning in history is realized. . . Always in your present lies the meaning in

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35. Lawrence Pryor, "Philosopher Says Morality Comes From Within," in *The Courier-Journal* (Louisville, Ky., May 19, 1965).
 36. Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Scribner, 1948), p. 57.
 37. "The Atheism of Paul Tillich," in *Religious Experience and Truth*, ed. Sidney Hook (New York: New York University Press, 1961), p. 61.

history, and you cannot see it as a spectator, but only in your responsible decisions. In every moment slumbers the possibility of being the eschatological moment. You must awaken it.³⁸

He distinguishes two kinds of history: *Historie* (history as record) and *Geschichte* (history as occurrence). The latter is viewed as the dynamic history that happens here, in the present moment, in me. On this basis many of the great events in the Christian faith are interpreted mythologically. The event of crucifixion, for example, is not basically the death of Jesus on Golgotha under Pontius Pilate about 30 A.D., but it is my death to sin and error. The event of resurrection is not the raising of Jesus from the tomb; it is the message of new life and my awakening to it. This is an existential interpretation, with a strong emphasis on subjectivization, which actually subverts the Gospel by the tendency to divorce it from an historical event in the biblical record.

SUMMARY AND EVALUATION

This brief survey, though far from being exhaustive, seeks to exhibit the existentialist features in the theology of Bultmann and Tillich. Viewed from its broad perspective, the rise and development of existentialism must be understood against the background of the tragedies and deep-rooted anxieties in the past generation, particularly in Europe. It is basically a protest against the pride and optimism of Modern Man, and had its beginning in Kierkegaard's revolt against Hegelianism, with its serene objectivity and optimistic acceptance of the actual. For Kierkegaard, Hegel's optimistic idealism was the worst possible framework in which authentic Christian faith can be set.

On the positive side, the desire to effectively communicate the Gospel to our generation, and the stress on personal decision involving commitment, and the frank assumption of personal responsibility, are wholesome emphases. Existentialism lends itself to extravagances, however, and this has not been avoided by either Tillich or Bultmann. Even the good intention of communicating the Gospel becomes a weakness with these men. The abstract, rarified jargon of Tillich is a fitting example.³⁹ John Herman Randall, Jr. reports the occasion when Tillich read a brilliant paper to a group of

38. Rudolf Bultmann, *The Presence of Eternity: History and Eschatology* (New York: Harper, 1957), p. 155.

39. Cf. "A Glossary of Tillich Terms," ed. Robert E. Chiles, in *Theology Today* (April, 1960), XVII, 77-89.

professional philosophers, which included among the listeners the distinguished representative of a very different philosophical tradition and language, G. E. Moore. When it came time for Moore to comment, he said: "Now really, Mr. Tillich, I don't think I have been able to understand a single sentence of your paper. Won't you please try to state one sentence, or even one word, that I can understand?"⁴⁰ If Tillich's terms were employed in the Lord's Prayer, according to the *Religious Research Digest*, here is how it might be re-interpreted within the framework of his theological terminology:

Our Ultimate Ground of Being, which are in the
 incomprehensible realm,
 Isolated by thy name,
 Thy Divine Acceptance come,
 Thine unknowable will be done,
 On earth as it is in the New Dimension;
 Give us this day the Courage To Be,
 And reconcile us to thyself just as we are,
 Even as we seek to be reconciled to others,
 Lead us not into guilt complexes,
 But deliver us from the Non-being of estrangement,
 For thine is the dynamic, the fellowship, and the
 Cosmic Fulfillment for ever.

Amen?⁴¹

James Denney's firm declaration that "no man can give at once the impression that he himself is clever and that Jesus Christ is mighty to save"⁴² is apropos. This is not to suggest that it was Tillich's motive to be clever, but such was the result, however. A hearer did not come away from Tillich's lectures extolling the virtues of Jesus Christ, the God-man, but rather talking about Paul Tillich, the erudite and often incomprehensible man.

The most disconcerting factor in the views of Bultmann and Tillich is their rejection of, even antipathy for, the supernatural and miraculous elements in the Christian faith. To a large extent this is the burden of Bultmann's famous lecture on "New Testament and Mythology,"⁴³ For both Bultmann and Tillich this amounts to

40. Kegley and Bretall, *op. cit.* p. 133.

41. *Religious Research Digest* (July-Sept., 1961), 1, 3.

42. Cf. James S. Stewart, *Heralds of God* (New York: Scribner, 1946), p. 74.

43. Bartsch, ed., *op. cit.* Cf. P. E. Hughes, *Scripture and Myth: An Examination of Rudolf Bultmann's Plea for Demythologization* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1956).

nothing less than a radical transformation of classical Christianity. In addition, their rejection of biblical authority,⁴⁴ the preoccupation with a humanistic center of faith, the discounting of the historical basis and objectivity of the Christian faith, and other factors,⁴⁵ are the breeding ground for agnosticism and skepticism. The harvest has already come in the radicalism of Bishop Robinson and Bishop Pike and the "God-is-dead" theologians. An investigation of this nature leaves us with an increased conviction that we have in Bultmann's and Tillich's interpretation of the Gospel something far other than the "faith once for all delivered to the saints."

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44. Cf. Frederick Sontag, "Biblical Authority and Tillich's Search for the Ultimate," in *The Journal of Bible and Religion* (October, 1962), XXX, 278-283.
45. Cf. the writer's articles in previous issues of *The Asbury Seminarian*: "What is Existentialism?" (Spring-Summer, 1957), XI, 7-14; "Tillich's Doctrines of God" (Spring-Summer, 1959), XIII, 10-17; "Rudolf Bultmann's Existentialist Interpretation of the New Testament" (Spring-Summer, 1963), XVII, 28-38.