

Tillich's Doctrine of God

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Three European-born theologians in our time are presenting the Christian faith in a comprehensive manner from different perspectives. Emil Brunner is attempting a re-formulation and re-statement of the classical tradition of Reformed theology in modern terms and with a Neo-orthodox emphasis. The most voluminous and monumental undertaking is that of Karl Barth who seeks to present a church or dogmatic theology from the theistic point of view. Paul Tillich, now professor at Harvard University, is endeavoring to write a systematic theology with an apologetic emphasis, being concerned primarily with its relevance to life as a whole, in terms of the modern situation. In addition to these efforts in the realm of systematic theology, it may be noted here that Rudolf Bultmann seeks also to restate what he terms the mythological elements in the message of the New Testament in a new way in order that the New Testament *kerygma* might be more effectively transmitted to men in a scientific age. Like Tillich, he attempts to make his reinterpretation existentially.

For Tillich, apologetic theology is "answering theology,"¹ for it seeks to answer questions which arise out of life's situations, pertaining primarily to man's existence, his salvation, and his destiny. The result of Tillich's efforts thus far is a unique systematic theology with an ontological and existential foundation and framework. Two volumes have been published, with Volume I appearing in 1951, which presented the first two parts, "Reason and Revelation" and "Being and God." Volume II, published in 1957, contains the third part of his system, "Existence and the Christ," and represents the first series of Tillich's Gifford Lectures given at the University of Aberdeen. Parts four and five, "Life and the Spirit" and "History and the Kingdom of God" are still to follow.

¹ *Systematic Theology*, I, p. 31.

The "Method of Correlation"

While accepting criticism such as Barth's of a general philosophy of religion on the basis of systematic theology, Tillich nevertheless tries to do justice to the theological factors and motives behind natural theology and philosophy of religion. Evidence of this is apparent in the philosophical element in the structure of his system. He calls his theological method "the method of correlation."² Correlation for Tillich is multiple in character and implication. In this method radical disjunctions are avoided, and instead the various polar elements which are present in every significant religious situation are conjoined, such as the human and the divine, the finite and the infinite, the knowing subject and the object known, freedom and destiny. Such contradictory views as atheism and theism are resolved, since neither atheists nor theists are outside God, according to Tillich.

It should be further noted that the existential character of theology must pervade the system throughout. It requires that every part of the system should include one section in which the question is developed by an analysis of human existence and existence generally, and one section in which the theological answer is given on the basis of the sources, the medium, and the norm of systematic theology.³

Does God Exist?

For Tillich, the basic theological question is the question of God.⁴ His answer to the query, "Does God exist?" is a categorical "No." According to his view, God does not exist because existence is a category of dependence. He therefore repudiates the "so-called proofs" for the "so-called existence" of God. Since God is beyond essence and existence "it is as atheistic to affirm the existence of God as to deny it."⁵ The very phrase, "the existence of God," is "in itself an impossible combination of words."⁶ God does not *exist*, says Tillich, but is rather the ground of all existence.

² *Ibid.*, p. 66.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

⁶ *Dynamics of Faith*, p. 47.

God as Being-itself

Basic to his whole system of thought is that God is being-itself.⁷ The question of God is not the question of a being besides others, but it is the existential question of being itself. The assertion that God is being-itself is a completely true and non-symbolic statement. All other descriptions of God, other than being-itself, are symbolic⁸ and not literal. Every concrete assertion about God must be symbolic, for a symbol is a segment of finite experience. God as person, Father and Lord come under this category. In fact the symbol of God as Lord and as Father does not appear for full discussion until page 286 of Volume I, which gives some indication of how the "God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" is imprisoned in his philosophical theism. Some of the symbolic terms of God are:

(1) He is "the living God." Since life is literally "the process in which potential being becomes actual being" and since God transcends all distinctions between potential and actual He is not living in the non-symbolic sense, but rather He is the ground of life.⁹

(2) He is *personal*.¹⁰ God is a personal God but this does not mean that He is a person, nor is He less than personal. It simply means, in non-symbolic language, that He is the ground of everything personal.

(3) He is *spirit*.¹¹ This is the most inclusive symbol for God, since it is the function in which all the elements of the structure participate. It is also the basis for any trinitarian statement.

(4) He is *creative*.¹² God is creative because He is God. He eternally "creates himself," a paradoxical phrase which states God's freedom.

(5) He is *holy*.¹³ Holiness expresses the unapproachable character of God. It is "that quality which qualifies all other qualities as divine. His power is holy power; his love is holy

⁷ *Systematic Theology*, I, p. 235

⁸ This much-used word in Tillich's writings is thoroughly discussed in *Dynamics of Faith*, pp. 41f.

⁹ *Systematic Theology*, I, pp. 241f.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 252ff.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 249f.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 271f.

love."

(6) He is *almighty*, or *omnipotent*.¹⁴ Omnipotence, with respect to time, is eternity; with respect to space, it is omnipresence; and with respect to the subject-object structure of being, it is omniscience.

(7) He is *love*.¹⁵ His love is a mystery for finite understanding because it is beyond the distinction between potentiality and actuality. "The wrath of God... is the emotional symbol for the work of love which rejects and leaves to self-destruction what resists it."¹⁶

(8) He is *Lord* and *Father*.¹⁷ These are the two main symbols of a person-to-person relationship with God. The two are inseparable. God as Lord expresses the holy power of God and distance, while the concept "Father" expresses unity with God who is holy love.

God as the Unconditional

The fact that man asks questions about God indicates that he is already aware of God. His awareness of God is not the result of argumentation, but rather a presupposition of His existence. Every argument for God's existence points to the presence of something unconditional within the self and the world. Without this, questions about God would not be asked. In Tillich's usage, the term "the unconditional" is a philosophical symbol for the ultimate concern of man. In his essay on "Tillich's Concept of the Protestant Era," James Luther Adams points out that the term, as suggested by its German connotations, conveys the idea of the majestic and the awful, the ultimate and the intimate, the sovereign, the commanding, that which cannot be tampered with, that which makes demands that cannot be ignored with impunity.¹⁸ For a man to be religious is not a matter of certain beliefs and practices, but rather the point of being ultimately concerned, and he is ultimately concerned when he experiences the unconditional. The experience of the unconditional is the experience of that which has absolute authority for one, of that before which he bows in humility and awe.¹⁹ Man's ultimate concern takes precedence over all other concerns in his life.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 272ff.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 279f.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 286f.

¹⁸ *The Protestant Era*, p. 300.

¹⁹ *The New Being*, pp. 152f.

On this basis, even the "irreligious" can be religious or give evidence of religion. Tillich avers that the atheist usually has an ultimate concern for truth. In fact, he insists that even the atheist may be saved, since his ultimate concern for truth and his loyalty to truth is itself a relationship to God, even though the atheist does not recognize it.²⁰

God as Transcendent

A prominent characteristic of Tillich's doctrine of God is his hostility to supernaturalism.²¹ In his view, transcendent is not to be identified with supernatural, in the sense that God is understood to be a transcendent object inhabiting a realm above this world. God is beyond naturalism and supernaturalism.²² Transcendence is not to be thought of in spatial terms.²³ For Tillich, transcendence is a quality of reality which is realized in faith. However, his use of depth as the dimensional symbol for transcendence leaves us with the problem of how to differentiate transcendence from immanence. The relevance of prayer in Tillich's understanding of God is brought into question, at least in its accepted views and practice. Prayer appears to be of little significance, as Tillich actually implies in a recent article.²⁴

The Trinitarian Problem

"Trinitarian monotheism is not a matter of number three."²⁵ The trinitarian problem, for Tillich, is the problem of the unity between ultimacy and concreteness in the living God.²⁶ He says the number three has no specific significance in itself, although it comes nearest to an adequate description of life-process. In contrast, the concern of the Church Fathers was "not to divide the substance (or essence) and not

²⁰ *The Protestant Era*, pp. xiv-xv.

²¹ *Systematic Theology*, I, pp. 65-66; 116-117.

²² *Systematic Theology*, II, p. 5. Cf. *Systematic Theology*, I, p. 263.

²³ *Systematic Theology*, I, p. 263.

²⁴ "How We Communicate The Christian Message," *The New Christian Advocate*, III, 5, p. 16 (May, 1959).

²⁵ *Systematic Theology*, I, p. 228.

²⁶ *Dynamics of Faith*, p. 46.

to confuse the persons" in the Godhead. Tillich leaves us with a hazy notion, at least gives no unequivocal statement concerning an ontological Trinity, and the question arises whether this does not indicate a gnostic trend.

God and Creation

God is creative because He is God, and since the divine life is essentially creative, in Tillich's view, all three modes of time must be used in symbolizing it. "God *has* created the world, he *is* creative in the present moment, and he *will* creatively fulfil his *telos*."²⁷ A pantheistic and Hegelian notion is expressed in Volume II: "...God is eternally creative, and through himself he creates the world and through the world himself."²⁸ On such a basis the world is required to make God no less than God to make the world. According to Tillich's ontological view, creation itself fell with man, since the doctrine of creation and the doctrine of the Fall join or coincide. He admits that this is the most difficult and the most dialectical point in the doctrine of creation. While creation, including man and the material, is good as potential essential being, it is fallen and evil as actualized existential being. In the relation of creation and the Fall, Tillich states forthrightly that "actualized creation and estranged existence are identical."²⁹ Thus, in man's transition from potentiality to actuality, sin is an unavoidable necessity.

God and Man's Salvation

Man's estrangement from God necessarily serves as the background for God's activity in overcoming it. These factors are given more thorough consideration in another article in this issue, but our concern here is God's relation to man's salvation. Tillich is critical of traditional views of Christology, and rejects as pagan and superstitious any notion that God became man, for that would mean that God ceased to be what He was and was changed into something else.³⁰ Tillich will allow the idea of "incarnation" in the Johannine statement that the "Logos became flesh" if "Logos" is understood as the universal principle of self-manifestation, in God as well as in

²⁷ *Systematic Theology*, I, p. 253.

²⁸ *Systematic Theology*, II, p. 147.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

nature and in history.³¹ He therefore rejects the virgin birth as an historical fact (as well as Christ's physical resurrection)³² in the life of Jesus.³³ As for atonement, "the atoning processes are created by God and God alone."³⁴ Though God "is eternally reconciled"³⁵ the atoning process "implies that God, in the removal of the guilt and punishment which stand between him and man, is not dependent on the Christ but that the Christ, as the bearer of the New Being, mediates the reconciling act of God to man."³⁶ The urgency and uniqueness of Christ's atoning work is further weakened by Tillich in his insisting that, though Christ is "the ultimate criterion of every healing and saving process," it cannot be insisted that "there is no saving power apart from him."³⁷ The idea of participation in the New Being in Jesus as the Christ sums up his concept of salvation. Tillich rejects the notion of "eternal condemnation," and says that God continues to work creatively in those who are in a state of separation. Though we must suspend judgment until Volume III appears, one wonders if this is a germinal idea for universalism.

An Evaluation

This in brief is Tillich's doctrine of God. He admits that his ontological system "demands the ability of radical abstraction."³⁸ At the same time he repudiates the insinuation that he has surrendered the substance of the Christian message merely because he uses unbiblical and untraditional terminology.³⁹ But the question persists after wading through Tillich's gymnastics of abstractions as to whether he is not forcing something alien into Christian wineskins. His ontological conception of God as being itself, the ground of everything that exists, leaves us with something abstract and impersonal, while biblical religion is intensely personal, reaching its climax in the doctrine of the incarnation where the personal is the chosen medium of divine self-manifestation.

His evaporation of historical facts by the overuse of symbolism, his persistent denial of the miraculous and

³¹ *Ibid.* , p. 95.

³² *Ibid.* , pp. 155f.

³³ *Ibid.* , p. 160.

³⁴ *Ibid.* , p. 173.

³⁵ *Ibid.* , p. 169.

³⁶ *Ibid.* , pp. 173-174.

³⁷ *Ibid.* , pp. 167-168.

³⁸ *Ibid.* , p. 11.

³⁹ *Ibid.* , p. viii.

supernatural, his attenuated Christology and soteriology--yes, all this and more is but to hand the sop to skepticism. His system is neither calculated to make the angels sing, nor to bring the Christian "joy and peace in believing through the power of the Holy Spirit." No ontological system can comprehend the full measure of God's grace which is the throbbing heart of biblical Christianity. Tillich's construction leaves us with the increasing conviction of man's impotence to press his way into the presence of God by abstractions, any more than by the power of speculative reason. In the words of H. R. Mackintosh, "If we are to approach, He must stretch forth His hand and draw us near. If we are to know Him, with the knowledge which is life eternal, He must speak His free and gracious Word, and we must hear in faith."⁴⁰

⁴⁰ *Types of Modern Theology*, p. 117.