
Tillich's Philosophy of History

The Bearing of His Historical Understanding on His Theological Commitment

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During a recent evening of bibliomaniacal revelry, Robert Allenson, president of the distinguished firm of theological booksellers in Naperville, Illinois, told me the following story about Tillich — a story that he had heard during his student days at Union Theological Seminary: Reinhold Niebuhr, deep in conversation and oblivious to all else, was descending a staircase, while Tillich was coming up the same stairs. As they passed, the student with Niebuhr asked him: «But what about Dr. Tillich's view on the subject?» «You mean that damned pantheist?» replied Niebuhr with a chuckle. Several weeks later, as spring was coming on, Niebuhr found Tillich, who was a great lover of nature, on his hands and knees in the quadrangle sniffing a crocus. «Ah, Professor Tillich,» he called out, «what are you doing?» Tillich, without changing his position, looked up and said: «It is zee damned pantheist worshipping zee flowers.»

This tale, perhaps better characterized as *Geschichte* than *Historie*, provides a most appropriate starting-point for our discussion of Tillich's philosophy of history, for it reminds us of the extent to which Tillich's views have been subject to facile generalization and superficial criticism. The centrality of Tillich's historical understanding to his entire theological endeavor makes it imperative that as we study this aspect of his thought we avoid labels, epithets, and the preconceptions that so readily give rise to them, and instead try sensitively to discover the root concerns that informed his views of historical reality.

CALL FOR A NEW APPROACH

Some justification for a paper on Tillich's philosophy of history seems in order when the mass of Tillich literature is growing daily, and when valuable analyses of his approach to history have already been done from a variety of theological perspectives.¹ Yet after one

has granted the genuine contributions offered by previous studies of Tillich's philosophy of history, two highly significant considerations undeniably demand a new and different approach: first, the striking «last stage» of Tillich's thought, characterized by his intense interest in the history of religions and his unwitting influence on death-of-God thinking during the final year of his life («Faithful to his vocation and his destiny,» said religious phenomenologist Mircea Eliade at the Tillich Memorial Service of the University of Chicago Divinity School on October 29, 1965, «Paul Tillich did not die at the end of his career, when he had supposedly said everything important that he could say. On the contrary, he died at the beginning of another renewal of his thought. Thus his death is even more tragic, for theologian and historian of religion alike. But it is also symbolic.»²); secondly, recent applications of the insights of analytical philosophy to philosophy of history³ have provided a technique by which a keener examination of Tillich's historical thinking now becomes possible to historian and theologian alike. The present essay, therefore, while endeavoring to present a synoptic view of the general development of Tillich's theology of history, will come to focus on the revolutionary last years of his career, and will seek to offer a responsible analytical critique of his fully matured outlook on the relations between history and religious belief.

ULTIMATE CONCERN AND THEONOMOUS HISTORY

A proper beginning is made at the keystone of Tillich's entire theological endeavor--a keystone which was put in place early in his life and which in so many and variegated ways, conditioned all his subsequent thinking. I refer to his passionate desire to create a theology and arrive at a historical understanding

of Christianity which would stand in opposition to all forms of idolatry.

We first meet our theologian in post-World War I Germany--a Germany smarting under military defeat and overwhelming war reparations, further weakened by the inept Weimar Republic, and open to the totalitarian panacea about to be offered by National Socialism.⁴ In the autobiographical section (Part One) of *The Interpretation of History*,⁵ Tillich describes his reaction to that situation: he established his political position «on the boundary»⁶ between the individualistic autonomy debilitating the Weimar government and the rising dictatorial heteronomy that would engulf Germany under Hitler. For Tillich, both autonomous individualism and heteronomous authoritarianism were demonic; he opted instead for a «theonomous» orientation: a religious socialism that would avoid these idolatrous extremes. Thus, until Reinhold Niebuhr and others at Union Theological Seminary engineered his emigration from the Third Reich in 1933, he served as one of the outstanding members of the German Christian-Socialist party.

Out of this political philosophy, Tillich developed a striking interpretation of history, involving the dialectic interaction of theonomous, heteronomous, and autonomous motifs. He writes:

By analyzing the character of «historical» time, as distinguished from physical and biological time, I developed a concept of history in which the movement toward the new, which is both demanded and expected, is constitutive. The content of the new, toward which history moves, appears in events in which the meaning and goal of history become manifest. I called such an event the «center of history»; from the Christian viewpoint the center is the appearance of Jesus as the Christ. The powers struggling with one another in history can be

given different names, according to the perspective from which they are viewed: demonic-*divine*-human, sacramental-*prophetic*-secular, heteronomous-*theonomous*-autonomous. Each middle term represents the synthesis of the other two, the one toward which history is always extending itself--sometimes creatively, sometimes destructively, never completely fulfilled, but always driven by the transcendent power of the anticipated fulfillment. Religious socialism should be understood as one such move toward a new theonomy. It is more than a new economic system. It is a comprehensive understanding of existence, the form of the theonomy demanded and expected by our present Kairos.⁷

identified with any earthly power, whether corporate or individual, but stands in judgment on all of man's decisions. A Christian socialism seemed, in Tillich's view, the best means of achieving such a theonomous goal.

GOD'S TRANSCENDENCE OVER HISTORY

What evaluation do we place on this theology of history? In spite of its obvious leanings toward over-generalization (a built-in danger in any historical typology), and in spite of the naïveté of its socialism (why cannot the social body become a demonic heteronomy no less all-embracing than the traditional national state?), Tillich's interpretation gives striking expression to one of the most fundamental themes of Christian philosophy of history: God's transcendence over history. This theme, stressed alike by the Old Testament prophets and the Protestant Reformers, is in essence the application to history of the First Commandment: «I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.» In the greatest of contemporary theological interpretations of history, Eric Voegelin's still unfinished *Order and History*, one can see how Tillich's theonomy motif has borne exceedingly rich fruit; as I have noted elsewhere, Tillich taught Voegelin to see «the central demonic temptation of our time: the attempt to create God in man's own image--in the image of his political, social, and religious theories and projects.» Both cry to our age what Luther cried to his: «Let God be God!»¹⁰

Yet Tillich never developed his historical philosophy in detail. *The Interpretation of History* was the only book-length work on the subject he was to write, and when, a few years before his death, the American Theological Library Association requested permission to reprint it,

Tillich views the history of western Christendom by way of this typology.⁸ The early Middle Ages exhibited theonomy, for both corporate and individual power were subordinated to an ultimate, divine perspective. In the later medieval period, the ecclesiastical system came to overshadow everything, and a heteronomy resulted. The Renaissance constituted an individualistic, autonomous over-reaction to the stifling medieval heteronomy. The early Reformation endeavored to restore the theonomous perspective of early Christianity, but in the later years of the Reformation era, Protestant ecclesiastical controls coupled with the absolutistic powers of rising national states created a new heteronomy. The eighteenth-century «Enlightenment» chose the path of rationalistic autonomy, thus over-reacting to heteronomy as the Renaissance had done in relation to medieval civilization.⁹ For Tillich, the breakdown of autonomy after World War I offered two alternatives: return to a totalitarian heteronomy, as exemplified by Nazi (or Communist) rule, or commitment to a theonomous way of life, where the Ultimate is not

Tillich refused. Though the autobiographical section of the book was recently reissued,¹¹ the substantive portion of it, applying Tillich's typology to historical epochs, remains out-of-print. Why? For one thing, as Tillich himself tells us in his contributions to *Christian Century's* «How My Mind Has Changed» series, he moved «beyond religious socialism» after coming to the United States,¹² and did not find the political climate of the present an incentive toward more extensive interpretation of the past:

Since the early twenties I have made a distinction between periods in which historical opportunities are predominant and those in which historical trends determine the outcome. While I felt that the years after World War I were years of opportunity, I feel that those following World War II have been years of trend. This also is only relatively true, but it has a somewhat paralyzing influence on political passion. And since I believe that the key to history is historical action, my desire to concentrate on the problems of an interpretation of history was also diminished.¹³

Here Tillich makes quite clear that it has been the present which has driven him to any historical interests that he has had, not the reverse, and it is not difficult to relate this present-time orientation to Tillich's profound concern with philosophical and religious existentialism, which is at root a present (rather than past) oriented world-view.¹⁴ But Tillich quite rightly claims that he «was never an existentialist in the strict sense of the word»;¹⁵ indeed, his entire theological endeavor can be understood as an attempt to stiffen and shore up existentialism through a firm ontology--or, expressed otherwise, an attempt to provide an apologetic bridge for the existentially-immersed modern man to cross over to an ontologically justifiable religious

position. Existential questions, according to Tillich's famous «principle of correlation,» can be answered only by proper ontological understanding. The most basic reason, then, for Tillich's lack of continuing interest in historical interpretation will be found to lie in the nature of his ontological commitment. To this we shall now give our attention.

BEING ITSELF AND HISTORY UNDER THE PROTESTANT PRINCIPLE

Tillich's profound concern with theonomy--with the elimination of all forms of idolatry through focus on the only Ultimate Concern that is truly ultimate--led him to condemn the identification of the Absolute with anything in the phenomenal world. Thus in his autobiography he wrote:

My fundamental theological problem arose in applying the relation of the absolute, which is implied in the idea of God, to the relativity of human religion. Religious dogmatism, including that of Protestant orthodoxy and the most recent phase of what is called dialectical theology, comes into being when a historical religion is cloaked with the unconditional validity of the divine, as when a book, person, community, institution, or doctrine claims absolute authority and demands the submission of every other reality; for no other claim can exist beside the unconditioned claim of the divine. But that this claim can be grounded in a finite, historical reality is the root of all heteronomy and all demonism. The demonic is something finite and limited which has been invested with the stature of the infinite.¹⁶

But, if nothing «finite and limited» can be identified with the Ultimate, where do we find it? What criteria do we employ? Tillich refuses to start the search for the Ultimate in the realm of epistemology, for, he claims, every epistemology presupposes an ontology. The start must there-

fore be made at the point of ontological reality itself.

«Being itself» is both the beginning and the end of the search for the Ultimate, for it *is* the only Ultimate and the only proper object of theonomous faith.¹⁷ Nothing--no existent thing, idea, or person--can be identified with Being itself without committing the root sin of idolatry; thus religious doctrines, affirmations and beliefs must be regarded as *symbolic* of Being itself and not confused with ultimate truth. For Tillich, religious phenomena, whether Christian or non-Christian, can never attain a status beyond the symbolic: that is to say, though they «participate» in ontological reality, they always point beyond themselves to that Being which is not another existent thing, but the ground of all that is.¹⁸ Here we arrive at Tillich's most fundamental operating rule, the «Protestant principle,» by which he scores all attempts to elevate the symbolic to the level of ultimacy: as the Reformers condemned late medieval Romanism for heteronomously absolutizing the visible Church and identifying it with the divine will, so we must unqualifiedly reject *all* historical identifications of the Absolute with religious phenomena. «Where the myth is taken literally,» writes Tillich, «God is less than the ultimate, he is less than the subject of ultimate concern, he is not God in the infinite and unconditional sense of the great commandment.»¹⁹

Tillich's ontological orientation had a predictable effect on his historical interests: it shifted him away from history, which at best can provide only symbols and myths of ultimacy, and directed his gaze to the purity of unconditioned Being itself. Thus one finds remarkably little stress placed on ecclesiology in Tillich's thought, and a tendency to depreciate the «Church manifest» in favor of a «Church latent» which is not «a specifiable or identifiable historical group,» but is composed of «those groups within

paganism, Judaism or humanism which also reveal or actualize the New Being»;²⁰ for Tillich this concept of a «latent» Church «precludes the possibility of ecclesiastical arrogance»²¹ by exposing to criticism the idolatrous and presumptive claims of the empirical churches. But, even more important, Tillich's ontological commitment demanded a radical reinterpretation of the place of the historical Christ in Christian theology.

FAITH AND HISTORICAL UNCERTAINTY

In *The Interpretation of History* it had been evident that Tillich was fully convinced by the rationalistic arguments of Lessing against historical certainty, and by the negative judgments of nineteenth century biblical criticism on the worth of the New Testament accounts of Jesus. There Tillich wrote that, consistent with an aim held as far back as his doctoral studies in 1911, he was attempting «to answer the question, how the Christian doctrine might be understood, if the non-existence of the historical Jesus should become historically probable.»²² In the second volume of his *Systematic Theology* the volume dealing with Christology, Tillich reaffirmed his conviction that «faith cannot rest on such unsure ground» as historical research into the life of Jesus;²³ and, a year before his death, in a foreword to the English translation of a seminal work by his teacher Martin Kähler, Tillich made clear that the years had not altered his viewpoint: «I do believe that one emphasis in Kähler's answer is decisive for our present situation, namely, the necessity to make the certainty of faith independent of the unavoidable incertitudes of historical research.»²⁴ But how to avoid «the incertitudes of historical research» when a historical incarnation of God in Christ appears central to the Christian proclamation? Tillich's answer is to regard the Christ-event, not from the stand-

point of *de facto* divine incarnation (this would have all the earmarks of idolatrous identification of Being itself with the finite and would violate the Protestant principle), but from the viewpoint of religious symbol. Jesus, understood symbolically as the Christ, is the most fundamental religious symbol of all, for in His death on the cross we have the great *Kairos*--the decisive event *par excellence*--which symbolizes the judgment of Being itself on all human pretensions and idolatrous expressions.²⁵ Indeed, Jesus conceived as the Christ may be termed the «New Being,» since in Him we see the dichotomy between man's essence and existence mended, and insight is given into the true nature of Being, which is Eros or self-realizing love.²⁶ But, having said all of this, we must always be on our guard against absolutizing the historical Jesus or basing our faith upon a historical foundation; indeed, the best evidence that the Christ-event constitutes the greatest of all religious symbols is that it judges even itself!

Every type of faith has the tendency to elevate its concrete symbols to absolute validity. The criterion of the truth of faith, therefore, is that it implies an element of self-negation. That symbol is most adequate which expresses not only the ultimate but also its own lack of ultimacy. Christianity expresses itself in such a symbol in contrast to all other religions, namely, in the Cross of the Christ. Jesus could not have been the Christ without sacrificing himself as Jesus to himself as the Christ. Any acceptance of Jesus as the Christ which is not the acceptance of Jesus the crucified is a form of idolatry. The ultimate concern of the Christian is not Jesus, but the Christ Jesus who is manifest as the crucified. The event which has created this symbol has given the criterion by which the truth of Chris-

tianity, as well as of any other religion, must be judged. The only infallible truth of faith, the one in which the ultimate itself is unconditionally manifest, is that any truth of faith stands under a yes-or-no judgment.²⁷

THE 'KINGDOM OF GOD' SYMBOL

The stage was therefore set for Tillich's analysis of «history and the Kingdom of God» in the third and final volume of his *Systematic Theology*. There he states that in regard to the question of history's meaning «the subject-object character of history precludes an objective answer in any detached, scientific sense,»²⁸ and that historical interpretation is subject to the «theological circle»²⁹ interlocking the observer with what he observes, so that «it is an unavoidable circle wherever the question of the ultimate meaning of history is asked.»³⁰ In the absence of any possibility of arriving at objective historical meaning (to do so would raise history to the level of ultimacy, thus violating the Protestant principle), Tillich affirms that the ambiguities of history are best understood and overcome through the symbol «Kingdom of God.»

The Kingdom of God may appear through a political system, a revolution, a church, or an individual, and whenever it does appear it heals the conflicts of history--but it heals them only fragmentarily. For the ultimate and final answer to history is not found in history, but at the end of history. This answer is the salvation of God, called by Tillich «universal essentialization,» which means that all being, man included, is raised to unambiguous unity with the ground and power of being, and therein finds its fulfillment.³¹

Since Tillich views evil as a negative--as the absence of being--he holds that it has no actual ontological existence; «universal essentialization» therefore precludes the eternal damnation of anyone.³²

Indeed, it is vital to see that when Tillich employs traditional eschatological terminology (general resurrection, last judgment, etc.), he does not refer to concrete historical happenings at the end of the age; he regards these doctrines as symbols of man's present relationship to the ground of his being. Thus he «can discuss the resurrection of the body without reference to the Resurrection of Christ as either norm or criterion»;³³ thus, à la Schelling's concept of the «becomingness of God,» Tillich sees Being itself as engaged in «the eternal conquest of the negative»;³⁴ and thus he diagrams³⁵ the relation between eternity and time not in terms of the traditional biblical concept of linear, historical progression,³⁶ viz.

Creation . Incarnation . Last Judgement

but in such a way as to affirm that «fulfillment is going on in every moment here and now beyond history, not some time in the future, but here and now above ourselves»:³⁷

*Eternity
the «existential now»
human history*

Kenneth Hamilton has well captured the symbolical spirit of Tillich's understanding of the Kingdom of God and its eschatological fulfillment:

Allegory: Christ will deliver up the Kingdom to the Father, and God will be all in all.

Reality: Universal participation in the Ground of Being can come only in essentialization, where the Absolute gathers into itself all that is positive in the movement from essence to existence, thus fulfilling itself through the world-process.³⁸

Tillich's endeavor to provide an ontological answer to man's existential predicament led him--as our analysis of his views of Christ and the Kingdom has well demonstrated--to a basically non-

historical interpretation of the Christian faith. It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that in spite of Tillich's opposition to «suprahistorical» view of salvation-history,³⁹ and in spite of his caveats against the historical indifferentism of the Eastern religions,⁴⁰ his last years saw him being drawn more and more into the orbit of non-historical Oriental thought. From May to July of 1960, Tillich visited Japan, and in retrospect he described the religious effect his Eastern experience had upon him:

They have confirmed my theological conviction that one cannot divide the religions of mankind into one true and many false religions. Rather, one must subject all religions, including Christianity, to the ultimate criteria of religion: the criterion of a faith which transcends every finite symbol of faith and the criterion of a love which unconditionally affirms, judges, and receives the other person.⁴¹

The fact that so many highly educated people (in the West) prefer Zen to Christianity seems to me to stem from their aversion to the «objectified» and literally interpreted Christian symbols. The necessity of «demythologizing» in the sense of «deliteralizing» or «deobjectifying» has become more urgent for me in light of these observations and of the whole impact of Eastern wisdom on me. And Eastern wisdom, like every other wisdom, certainly belongs to the self-manifestations of the Logos and must be included in the interpretation of Jesus as the Christ, if he is rightly to be called the incarnation of the Logos.⁴²

On his return to the United States, Tillich delivered at Columbia University the American Bampton Lectures for 1961, subsequently published under the title, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions*,⁴³ there Tillich himself

drew many of the parallels between Eastern religious thought and his own ontological version of Christianity that Professor Yoshinori Takeuchi of Kyoto had earlier noted in his Festschrift essay for Tillich.⁴⁴ Mircea Eliade, in memorializing Tillich, noted that the Bampton Lectures signified «only the beginning of a new phase in Paul Tillich's thought»⁴⁵-- a phase marked by his proposal at the University of Chicago Divinity School of a joint seminar on History of Religions and Systematic Theology; this took place in the winter and autumn quarters of 1964, and Eliade describes Tillich's contribution to it in terms that well characterize the religious ontologist whose interests had always extended beyond the historical confines of Christian faith:

Paul Tillich would never have become a historian of religions nor, as a matter of fact, a *historian* of anything else. He was interested in the existential meaning of history--*Geschichte*, not *Historie*. When confronted with archaic, traditional, and oriental religions, he was interested in their historical concreteness and immediacy, not in their modifications or changes or in the results of the flowing of time. He did not deny the importance of the temporal flux for the understanding of the history of specific religious forms--but he was primarily interested in their structures: he deciphered their meaning in grasping their structures.⁴⁶

Tillich's last public lecture was delivered on October 12, 1965, on the subject, «The Significance of the History of Religions for the Systematic Theologian.» In it he correlated his new appreciation for the non-historical religions of mankind with his ontologically conceived, essentially non-historical interpretation of Christianity; his hope was that out of them a «Religion of the Concrete Spirit» might arise. Tillich's remarks, quoted *in extenso*, provide a fitting close to his career as

well as an appropriate base for the criticism of his philosophy of history in the subsequent sections of this paper.

It might well be that one can say the inner *telos*, which means the inner aim of a thing, such as the *telos* of the acorn is to become a tree--the inner aim of the history of religions is to become a Religion of the Concrete Spirit. But we cannot identify this Religion of the Concrete Spirit with any actual religion, not even Christianity as a religion. . . . We can see the whole history of religions in this sense as a fight for the Religion of the Concrete Spirit, a fight of God against religion within religion. And this phrase, the fight of God within religion against religion, could become the key for understanding the otherwise extremely chaotic, or at least seemingly chaotic, history of religions. . . . I must say that my own *Systematic Theology* was written before these seminars and had another intention, namely, the apologetic discussion against and with the secular. Its purpose was the discussion or the answering of questions coming from the scientific and philosophical criticism of Christianity. But perhaps we need a longer, more intensive period of interpenetration of systematic theological study and religious historical studies. Under such circumstances the structure of religious thought might develop in connection with another or different fragmentary manifestation of theonomy or of the Religion of the Concrete Spirit. This is my hope for the future of theology.⁴⁷

THE TILLICHIAN DILEMMA

Shortly after Tillich's death, *The Christian Century* published an article entitled, «After Tillich, What?» Its author concluded his evaluation as follows: «Tillich solved the problem of reflection and doubt not by equating the absolute

with the whole content of a system of thought or of religious feeling, but by identifying it with a paradoxical object--one whose objectivity can be grasped only in its self-cancellation and whose power is exercised by its self-negation. . . . To have seen this is Tillich's enduring contribution.»⁴⁸ In point of fact, to have «seen» this is Tillich's quandary--a dilemma which makes Robert Benchley's «ten years in a quandary» seem like a mild experience indeed.

«THE PROTESTANT PRINCIPLE»

As we have emphasized, Tillich was concerned throughout his career with the issue of idolatry: he wished above all to have an ultimate concern that was in fact ultimate (Being itself), and he endeavored mightily to develop a methodology (the Protestant principle) which would crush all attempts to absolutize the non-ultimate. But, in this case, where does ultimacy lie? With Being itself or with the Protestant principle? With «the absolute» or with its «self-negation?» This quandary was brought into sharp focus by Thomas J. J. Altizer, in his 1963 review of Tillich's *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions*, where he asserted that had Tillich applied his Protestant principle consistently--by refusing to give ultimacy even to Being itself--he could have become the progenitor of a new theonomous age: «Potentially Tillich could become a new Luther if he would extend his principle of justification by doubt to a theological affirmation of the death of God.»⁴⁹ Tillich, however, was horrified at such a suggestion, and in the heated argument with death-of-God theologians shortly before his death (Mrs. Tillich connects his fatal heart attack with it)⁵⁰ Tillich refused to give the Protestant principle a critical function in relation to Being itself; though his writings had never set limits on the application of the principle (even Jesus, as we noted, was judged by

it), and even though no revelational limit to its use could be appealed to (since revelation had also been subordinated to it), Tillich found himself unwilling to allow the principle to destroy his own ultimate concern.⁵¹ Like the sorcerer's apprentice, he perhaps became dimly aware too late of having conjured up a critical methodology that even he was incapable of controlling; like a modern King Midas (to change the simile) he had acquired a power that was now systematically and logically destroying that which he loved most.

«BEING ITSELF»

But suppose--by what Franz Pieper called the «happy inconsistency» so characteristic of modern theologians⁵²--the Protestant principle is kept in subordination to Being itself: is Tillich better off? Can Being itself survive as an ultimate concern? The answer is Yes only if Being itself is given no descriptive content whatever, i.e., if it is understood in a purely formal sense only. Why? Because the moment any characteristics are given to it, then these fall under the axe of the Protestant principle, which preserves Being itself from idolatrous, anthropomorphic contamination. *Everything* predicated of Being itself (even love) must be regarded symbolically in order to avoid absolutizing finite values.⁵³ Under these circumstances, though Tillich insists that religious symbols do «participate» in the ultimate reality to which they point, no meaningful criteria can possibly determine whether an alleged symbol is in fact truly symbolic of Being itself. Otherwise stated, there is no way of knowing which aspects of a symbol only point to the absolute and which actually participate in it--or indeed, if any genuine participation occurs at all.⁵⁴

And if we do take Being itself in a purely formal sense? Then we indeed have an irrefutable concept--but its irrefutability

is a Pyrrhic victory, since it is achieved at the cost of draining away all substantive knowledge. As Willard van Orman Quine has well stated:

A curious thing about the ontological problem is its simplicity. It can be put in three Anglo-Saxon monosyllables: «What is there?» It can be answered, moreover, in a word--«Everything» (or Being itself!)-and everyone will accept this answer as true. However, this is merely to say that there is what there is.⁵⁵

Paul Edwards, in a trenchant essay on «Professor Tillich's Confusions,» delivers the *coup de grâce*: «Tillich's theology is indeed safe from anti-theological arguments, . . . but only at the expense of *being compatible with anything whatever*. All of us normally regard this . . . as a reason for calling a sentence meaningless or devoid of cognitive content.»⁵⁶

REMEDY: HISTORY THE FUNDAMENT OF FAITH

Whether Being itself or the Protestant principle serves as the ultimate reference point in the Tillichian world-view, the result is the same: total absence of religious content. Neither the purely analytical concept of Being nor the purely critical Protestant principle can offer any substantive answers to ultimate questions such as those concerned with the meaning of history. To avoid heteronomous and autonomous idolatries, we must be able to distinguish true theonomy from them; but the formality of Tillich's system precludes the possibility of our doing so. The crucial events (*kairoi*) of history must be identified and related to the great *Kairos*--the Christ-event--but the symbolical character of the latter leaves us without clear criteria for recognizing *kairoi* and, equally important, for distinguishing divine from demonic *kairoi*. And the Kingdom of God hardly solves the ambiguities of history when the operations of Being itself cannot be unambiguously specified.

Where does the root difficulty lie in Tillich's remarkable system? Precisely at the epistemological point: Tillich consistently refuses to face the verification question. In the spirit of such metaphysical philosophers of history as Kant and Hegel,⁵⁷ he does not see that the attempt to produce a philosophy of maximum generality results in a formal *Weltanschauung* that says nothing because it says everything. Over much of Tillich's labors the remark could be posted that Wolfgang Pauli wrote on a paper submitted to him by a fellow physicist: «This isn't right. This isn't even wrong!» Tillich missed the vital insight offered by contemporary analytical philosophy⁵⁸ in its distinction between analytic (purely formal) and synthetic (content) judgments; only the latter, based on experiential investigation of the world, can provide substantive knowledge of reality. If one intends, therefore, to speak of religious or historical meaning, he must offer concrete evidence in behalf of his claims--or, at minimum, show that his views are not compatible with all negative evidence! Granted, only a high level of probability can ever be adduced in support of such synthetic claims; but to demand absolute certainty is to obtain pure formality and thus no knowledge of the world at all.

HISTORICAL PROBABILITY

In trying to elevate religious truth above the «incertitudes» of history, Tillich was attempting the impossible. All our verifiable knowledge of the world, present or past, is based on the sifting of experiential data, and just as in ordinary life we must constantly jump the gap between probability and certainty by faith, so in the religious realm we have no right to demand--much less any expectation of acquiring--a certainty transcending the probabilities of historical evidence.⁵⁹ Ian Ramsey has recently

resuscitated Butler and Newman in effectively making our point:

Butler reminded us that a total devotion to duty--shown, for example, by leaping into a river to save a drowning child--could, *and reasonably*, be associated with many empirical uncertainties and probabilities; we might be mistaken about the strength of the current, about our swimming ability, or whether in fact that floating heap was a child, and so on. But acknowledging these uncertainties Butler claimed that we should nevertheless think a man in a literal sense distracted--not himself--who failed to respond to the moral challenge displayed by such a situation of great consequence. For Butler this moral response reared on probabilities, this total devotion, and (in Newman's phrase) this «real assent» is reasonable, as being that which any «reasonable» man, anyone deserving to be called a person, would in similar circumstances display. «Probability» in this special sense is (said Butler) the «guide of life.» So our Christian convictions based on historical uncertainties are in principle reasonable as being one with the rest of life.⁶⁰

How unfortunate that Tillich uncritically absorbed the negative nineteenth century criticism of the New Testament records and never made an effort to distinguish truly inductive historical method from the rationalistic, antimiraculous historicism that passed itself off as scientific history.⁶¹ Had he made this distinction, he would have found the New Testament documents fully capable of sustaining the truth-claims of the Christian faith,⁶² and he would not have been led into a quixotic endeavor to ground religious belief in formalistic ontology. Tragically, his focus shifted from the facts of history to the tautologies of Being, until he was incapable of saying anything concrete about either history or faith. When

the *Systematic Theology* reaches its terminal sections on the Kingdom of God and eschatology, the reader is uncomfortably reminded of Wolcott Gibbs's evaluation of Alexander Woolcott: «He wasn't exactly hostile to facts, but he was apathetic about them.» And in Tillich's «hope for the future of theology,» a «Religion of the Concrete Spirit,» one finds the exact opposite of factual concreteness: a transparent wraith of a religion, capable of interpretation in any direction one wishes--the parent of Al-tizer's mystical «third age of the Spirit»⁶³ and of the secular theologians' «God of the present,» who is conveniently identified with the social action favored at the moment.⁶⁴

THE JESUS OF HISTORY

Herbert Butterfield's warning still stands: «the Christ of the theologians» must not be «divorced from the Jesus of history.»⁶⁵ Had Tillich approached religious and historical truth-questions from the standpoint of the Jesus of the primary documents, he would have found the answer to his quest. Claiming to be no less than God incarnate and verifying that claim by His resurrection, Jesus demonstrated that the ultimate could and did enter the phenomenal world, that those who had seen Him had seen the Father (John 14:6—9), and that therefore His word stood in judgment and in grace over everything else. The true preservative against idolatry is, then, not a Protestant principle (or any other principle) that judges Jesus, but acknowledgment that Jesus and Jesus alone is the Way, Truth, and Life. Whereas the Protestant principle leads logically to a negation of ultimacy itself, Jesus is the door leading the believer into the Father's Kingdom. Now the characteristics of God's reign become clear through the teachings, the life, and the death of His only Son; and a literal Incarnation of God becomes the empirical center of history, the key to

its meaning, and the earnest of eschatological fulfillment at the time of Christ's return.⁶⁶

Only if God did in fact enter the world in Jesus can Tillich's theonomous perspective on the total historical drama come to fruition. For apart from a *de facto* revelation of God in history, what Danto calls «substantive philosophy of history» is in principle impossible, since it always implies a stance outside of time by which the philosopher views «the present and the past in the perspective of the future (indeed of the ultimate future, for there must be an end to every story).»⁶⁷ Wittgenstein was quite right that «the sense of the world must lie outside the world.»⁶⁸ How to find it then? Not by constructing philosophical towers of Babel that inevitably produce confusion because they attempt the impossible, but by recognizing that «no man has ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man» (John 3:13). Lacking the eternal perspective necessary to discover history's meaning, we must forever remain in darkness concerning it unless a shaft of light from outside the world illumines the shadows of history. Tillich, for all his ontological speculations and his overweening desire to escape from the historical, found himself compelled to locate the great *Kairos* in a minor province of the Roman empire during the reign of Caesar Augustus. Would that Tillich had given himself fully to that historical event, for there the Light of the world indeed shone forth; there a perspicuous revelation from outside of time clarified the meaning of history once for all.

Notes

¹ Especially noteworthy are: (1) James Luther Adams, «Tillich's Interpretation of History,» in Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (eds.), *The Theology of Paul Tillich* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), pp. 294—309 (with Tillich's reply to Adams and to other critics of his historical

position, pp. 345—48); (2) John W. Sanderson, Jr., «Historical Fact or Symbol? The Philosophies of History of Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr,» *Westminster Theological Journal*, XX (May, 1958), 158—69, and XXI (November, 1958), 58—74; (3) William Wright Paul, «Paul Tillich's Interpretation of History» (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms [AC-1 No. 59—3124], 1959); (4) George H. Tavaud, *Paul Tillich and the Christian Message* (New York: Scribner, 1962), especially chap. v («Christology As History»), pp. 82—112; (5) Robert D. Knudsen, «Symbol and Myth in Contemporary Theology, with Special Reference to the Thought of Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Nicolas Berdyaev» (Roslyn, Pa.: The Author, 1963), passim (mimeographed and stylistically revised version of the author's 1952 S.T.M. thesis submitted at Union Theological Seminary, New York); (6) J. Heywood Thomas, *Paul Tillich: An Appraisal* («The Library of Philosophy and Theology»; London: SCM Press, 1963), especially chaps. iii («Christology and Historical Criticism»), pp. 78—90, and vii («History and the Kingdom of God»), pp. 150—71; (7) Avery R. Dulles, S.J., «Paul Tillich and the Bible,» in Thomas A. O'Meara and Celestin D. Weissner (eds.), *Paul Tillich in Catholic Thought* (Dubuque, Iowa: Priory Press, 1964), pp. 109—32 (with Tillich's reply as to the relation between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, pp. 309—10); (8) James Luther Adams, *Paul Tillich's Philosophy of Culture, Science, and Religion* (New York: Harper, 1965), passim; and (9) Bruce J. R. Cameron, «The Historical Problem in Paul Tillich's Christology,» *Scottish Journal of Theology*, XVIII (September, 1965), 257—72.

² Mircea Eliade, «Paul Tillich and the History of Religions,» in *The Future of Religions by Paul Tillich* (New York: Harper, 1966), pp. 35—36.

³ E.g., Arthur C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

⁴ Cf. Karl Hennig, «Paul Tillich: Leben und Werk,» in *Der Spannungsbogen. Festgabe für Paul Tillich zum 75. Geburtstag* (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1961), pp. 171 ff.

⁵ Paul Tillich, *The Interpretation of History*, trans. Rasetzki and Talmey (New York: Scribner, 1936); Part One of this work has just been reissued under the title, *On the Boundary: An Autobiographical Sketch* (New York: Scribner, 1966).

⁶ With the «boundary» motif in Tillich's thought, cf. Helmuth Thielicke, «Paul Tillich--Wanderer zwischen zwei Welten,» in *Der Spannungsbogen*, pp. 9—24.

⁷ Tillich, *On the Boundary*, pp. 80—81.

⁸ I have discussed and schematically diagrammed Tillich's theonomy-heteronomy-autonomy view in my book, *The Shape of the Past: An*

Introduction to Philosophical Historiography (*"History in Christian Perspective,"* Vol. 1; Ann Arbor, Michigan: Edwards Brothers, 1963), pp. 127—31.

⁹ Cf. Tillich, *"A History of Christian Thought: A Stenographic Transcription of Lectures Delivered during the Spring Term, 1953 at Union Theological Seminary,"* ed. Peter H. John, pp. 234 to 41. (*"These lectures are intended for private use of present and former students of Dr. Tillich and are not to be quoted for publication without his permission"*--Foreword.)

¹⁰ Montgomery, op. cit., pp. 135—36; I treat Voegelin in detail on pp. 131 ff.

¹¹ See above, note 5.

¹² Cf. Hanns Lilje, *"Paul Tillich's Bedeutung für das amerikanische Geistesleben,"* in *Der Spannungsbogen*, pp. 149—69.

¹³ Tillich, in Harold E. Fey (ed.), *How My Mind Has Changed* (New York: Meridian Living Age Books, 1961), pp. 165—66.

¹⁴ Cf. Rudolf Bultmann's characteristic statement at the close of his Gifford Lectures: *"Always in your present lies the meaning in history"* (The Presence of Eternity: History and Eschatology [New York: Harper, 1957], p. 155).

¹⁵ *How My Mind Has Changed*, p. 165. Cf. Tillich's exceedingly valuable essay, *"Existential Philosophy: Its Historical Meaning,"* in his *Theology of Culture*, ed. Robert C. Kimball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 76—111.

¹⁶ *On the Boundary*, p. 40.

¹⁷ *"The God who is a being is transcended by the God who is Being itself, the ground and abyss of every being"* (Tillich, *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955], p. 82).

¹⁸ See Tillich's essays, *"The Meaning and Justification of Religious Symbols"* and *"The Religious Symbol"* in Sidney Hook (ed.), *Religious Experience and Truth* (New York: New York University Press, 1961), pp. 3—11, 301-21.

¹⁹ Tillich, *"Where Do We Go from Here in Theology?"* *Religion in Life*, Winter, 1955—56.

²⁰ Thomas, op. cit., p. 140.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 140—41. Tillich treats the *"Church latent"* in conjunction with several topics discussed in the third volume of his *Systematic Theology*.

²² *The Interpretation of History*, p. 33.

²³ *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951—1963), II, 113.

²⁴ Tillich, *"Foreword"* to Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ*, trans. Carl E. Braaten (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), p. xii. (*This translation is limited to the first and second essays in the 1896 ed. of Kähler's book.*)

²⁵ Cf. Tillich's article, *"Kairos,"* in Halverson and Cohen (eds.), *A Hand-book of Christian Theology* (New York: Meridian Living Age Books, 1958), pp. 196—97.

²⁶ See Tillich's *Love, Power, and Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), passim.

²⁷ Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958), pp. 97—98.

²⁸ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, III, 349.

²⁹ *I have dealt in some detail with the issue of the "theological circle" in my paper, "Lutheran Hermeneutics and Hermeneutics Today,"* in *Aspects of Biblical Hermeneutics* (*"Concordia Theological Monthly. Occasional Papers,"* No. 1; St. Louis, Missouri, 1966), pp. 78—108.

³⁰ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, loc. cit.

³¹ Alexander J. McKelway, *The Systematic Theology of Paul Tillich* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1964), p. 249.

³² *"Absolute judgments over finite beings . . . are impossible, because they make the finite infinite"* (Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, III, 407).

³³ McKelway, op. cit., p. 245, n. 11.

³⁴ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, III, 405. *On the profound influence of Schelling's Lebensphilosophie on Tillich's ontological thought, see John H. Randall, Jr., "Tillich's Systematic Theology, vol. III,"* *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, XIX (May, 1964), 356 ff.

³⁵ See Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, III, 420.

³⁶ As presented, e.g., in my *Shape of the Past*, pp. 42, 45.

³⁷ Tillich, *"The Decline and the Validity of the Idea of Progress,"* in his *The Future of Religions*, p. 79. Cf. Tillich's theme of *"the eternal now,"* which served as the title of one of his important sermons and was chosen by him as the title for the entire published sermon collection in which it appeared: *The Eternal Now* (New York: Scribner, 1963).

³⁸ Kenneth Hamilton, *"Paul Tillich,"* in Philip Edgcumbe Hughes (ed.), *Creative Minds in Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1966), p. 478. Cf. Hamilton's book-length treatment of Tillich: *The System and the Gospel: A Critique of Paul Tillich* (*The Library of Philosophy and Theology*); London: SCM Press, 1963).

³⁹ See Tillich's *Systematic Theology*, III, 363. *On the dialectical concept of "suprahistory" ("metahistory,"* Geschichte), see my essay, *"Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology of History,"* published both in the *Evangelical Theological Society Bulletin*, VI (May, 1963), 39—49, and in *The Cresset*, XXVII (November, 1963), 8—14.

⁴⁰ See, e.g., his 1939 essay, *"Historical and Non-historical Interpretations of History: A Comparison,"* in his *The Protestant Era*, trans. James

Luther Adams (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), pp. 16—31.

41 How My Mind Has Changed, p. 161.

42 Ibid., pp. 163—64.

43 New York: Columbia University Press, 1963.

44 Takeuchi, «Buddhism and Existentialism: The Dialogue between Oriental and Occidental Thought,» in Walter Leibrich (ed.), Religion and Culture: Essays in Honor of Paul Tillich (New York: Harper, 1959), pp. 291—318.

45 *Eliade*, in Tillich's *The Future of Religions*, p. 32.

46 Ibid., p. 33.

47 Tillich, «The Significance of the History of Religions for the Systematic Theologian,» in his *The Future of Religions*, pp. 87—88, 91.

48 Robert P. Scharlemann, «After Tillich, What?» *The Christian Century* LXXXII (December 1, 1965), 1480. Scharlemann's muddy neo-Tillichian thinking has been scored by John Hick in an exchange in *Theology Today*, XXII (January, 1966), 513—29; XXIII (April, 1966), 139—40.

49 Altizer, in *The Christian Scholar*, XLVI (Winter, 1963), 362. Cf. my book, *The 'Is God Dead?' Controversy* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1966), pp. 23—24 and passim.

50 So reports Dr. Jürgen Winterhager, professor of ecumenics at Berlin.

51 Cf. Tillich's sermon, «Our Ultimate Concern,» in his *The New Being* (New York: Scribner, 1955), pp. 152—60; and D. Mackenzie Brown (ed.), *Ultimate Concern: Tillich in Dialogue* (New York: Harper, 1965), passim.

52 Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, trans. and eds. T. Engelder, J. T. Mueller, and W. W. F. Albrecht (4 vols.; St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia, 1950—1957), II, 557.

53 «There can be no doubt that any concrete assertion about God must be symbolic, for a concrete assertion is one which uses a segment of finite experience in order to say something about him» (Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, 239).

54 This point has been made by a number of Tillich's critics in the symposium edited by Sidney Hook (op. cit.).

55 Willard van Orman Quine, «On What There Is,» in his *From a Logical Point of View* (2d ed.; New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), p. 1.

56 Paul Edwards, «Professor Tillich's Confusions,» *Mind* LXXIV (April, 1965), 197 (Edward's italics).

57 See my *Shape of the Past*, pp. 67—68, 70—71; and cf. Tillich's own remarks in *How My Mind Has Changed*, p. 168. It should not be necessary to point out that for all this Tillich was no orthodox Kantian or Hegelian (see *The Future of Religions*, pp. 85—86).

58 Of more than humorous interest is Tillich's passing comment: «I once said to a Logical positivist that I would like him to attend my lectures

and to raise his finger if something is said that lacks rationality. He answered that he could not accept this task because he would have to raise his finger during the whole lecture» (The Theology of Paul Tillich, eds. Kegley and Bretall, p. 330).

59 Tillich's inability to grasp this vital fact was clearly brought out in his interview with Ved Mehta shortly before his death. Mehta: «I asked Tillich whether . . . he thought Christ really performed miracles or whether he thought the miracles were 'mythological,' in Bultmann's sense.» «I think there is good evidence for some of those healings that He did,» he (Tillich) replied equably. «But in history, of course, you never have definite evidence for anything» (Ved Mehta, «The New Theologian I,» *The New Yorker* XLI [November 13, 1965], 128).

60 Ian T. Ramsey, *Christian Discourse: Some Logical Explorations* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 23—24.

61 This is Alan Richardson's primary criticism of Tillich's theology of history; see Richardson's *History Sacred and Profane* (Bampton Lectures for 1962. London: SCM Press, 1964), pp. 127—31.

62 See Montgomery, «Toward a Christian Philosophy of History,» in Carl F. H. Henry (ed.), *Jesus of Nazareth: Saviour and Lord* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1966), pp. 225—40. Argues George H. Tavard (op. cit., pp. 111—12): «Tillich is right in being sceptical of the historians' effort to re-write the story of Jesus—but for the wrong reason. Historians cannot re-write the story because it is already written: the historical value of the New Testament is plain enough. Historians have not been able to make its reliability improbable. Tillich has simply not been radical enough in criticizing liberal theology. He has not seen that the historians who doubt the value of the records have failed to establish their point. Here, Paul Tillich remains a child of his generation, a victim of the historicism of the last century.»

63 See Montgomery, *The 'Is God Dead?' Controversy*, p. 26.

64 Cf. James McCord's opinion, described in *Time*, August 5, 1966, pp. 69—70, that «we are on the threshold of a whole new era in theology,» characterized by emphasis on the Holy Spirit—«the God of the present.»

65 Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (London: Collins Fontana Books, 1957), p. 168.

66 Montgomery, «Where Is History Going?» *Religion in Life*, XXXIII, No. 2 (Spring, 1964).

67 Danto, op. cit., p. 12.

68 «Der Sinn der Welt muss ausserhalb ihrer liegen» (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6. 41).