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The Symbolistic Christology of Paul Tillich

H.D. McDonald

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'It is almost a truism to assert that religious language is symbolic', declares Paul Tillich in an article entitled, 'Existential Analysis and Religious Symbols'.¹ It follows, consequently, that Tillich's whole theology from first to last is dominated by this one idea. Tillich thus rejects out of hand the concept of God as *literally* a personal and spiritual Being who *literally* enters into personal and spiritual relationships with human beings. He seeks, therefore, to transform the content of historical Christian dogmatics into an array of symbols; and so contends that the whole theological enterprise is to set forth the religious meaning of these symbols. 'Theology as such', states Tillich, 'has neither the task nor the power to confirm or negate religious symbols. It is to interpret them according to theological principles and methods'.²

Between the publication of the first volume of his *Systematic Theology* in 1951 and the second volume in 1959, he sees the problem of symbolic knowledge of God as having moved into the centre of the philosophical interest in religion.³ It is, consequently, Tillich's firm conviction that knowledge of God can be described only through the semantic use of symbolic words. The *literalist* principle of biblical hermeneutics, Tillich declares, is proved false by reason of the many curious attempts to construe a 'Jesus of History'. It was premised that the gospels afforded data for a historiographic account of the events of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. But, according to Tillich, the truth is far otherwise. The real Jesus of history is virtually unknown.⁴ He was at most a quite undistinguished peasant who became clothed with the 'symbols' of the church's faith in 'the Christ event'.⁵

The true hermeneutical principle is that which found expression in the tradition of the Alexandrian teachers, Clement and Origen. They were the first openly to repudiate the merely historical and literal in the conviction that the essential meaning of scripture must be sought below the surface. Tillich contends quite simply that all religious affirmations are 'non-literal'. In this respect he regards the idea of symbolism as akin to the Thomistic doctrine of analogy.⁶ He protests against anyone using the phrase 'only a symbol'. Such a statement is to be avoided, for the simple reason that 'non-analogous and non-symbolic knowledge of God has less truth than analogous or symbolic knowledge'.⁷ Tillich is, therefore, emphatic in declaring that 'the centre of my theological doctrine of the knowledge of God is the concept of symbol'.⁸

¹ 'Existential Analysis and Religious Symbols' in H A Basilus (ed *Contemporary Problems of Religion* 1956) 37f; cf W Herberg, *Four Existential Theologians* (1958) 306f.

² Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (1951) 266 (hereafter referred to by the symbol ST); cf 'Theology is for Tillich the interpretation of the symbols of man's ultimate concern', 'The Life and Mind of Paul Tillich', in *Religion and Culture; Essays in Honour of Paul Tillich* (1959) 355 n9; see D H Kelsey, *The Fabric of Paul Tillich's Theology* (1967) 21f, 40f.

³ Cf Tillich, ST 11 (1957) 9.

⁴ ST II, 121.

⁵ Cf 'Faith cannot even guarantee the name "Jesus" in respect to him who was the Christ. It must leave that to the incertitudes of our historical knowledge.' ST II, 121.

⁶ Cf ST I, 266; II 132; cf G Weigel, 'Myth and Symbol' in *Religion and Culture*, 127.

⁷ ST I, 146; cf 267.

⁸ Tillich, 'Reply to Interpretation and Criticisms', in C W Kegley and R W Bertnall (eds) *Tillich* (1956) 333.

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Tillich's need for symbolism arises directly out of his view of the Christian's faith in God. For Tillich the word 'God' holds a twofold meaning. On the one hand 'God' is the 'altogether Other', or, as he prefers to put it, the 'unconditional transcendent'.⁹ or 'ecstatically transcendent'.¹⁰ As a result of this declaration, Tillich advances an extreme form of 'supra-rational theism'.¹¹ Although it is a serious question whether in the end his is a genuine theism'.¹² The other sense of the term 'God' connotes for Tillich an object somehow endowed with qualities and actions. It is the 'Object' envisaged by the religious consciousness. In this context the term 'God' is a symbol; indeed, the basic and all-embracing symbol of religion. Tillich therefore conceives of a 'God beyond God'. There is 'God' as ultimate reality, as 'being itself', or 'the ground of all being'; and 'God' in relation to the religious consciousness, endowed with personal attributes.

God in the ultimate sense is 'being itself'. He is not a Being or even the Being, since that would make 'him' just *primus inter pares*. As Being itself, God is the ultimate of all, and inherent in all. As such he cannot be particularised by any adjectival prefixes as the 'most' this or that. As Being itself 'God' is beyond all contrasts of essence and existence, and is 'prior' to 'the split which characterises finite being'.¹³ Yet God is not to be regarded as a Being, whether by the ontological argument which includes essence in existence, or by the Aristotelian cosmological method of deriving existence from the things of sense. In truth the question of God's existence can be neither asked nor answered.¹⁴

In the first volume of his *Systematic Theology*, Tillich taught that the only non-symbolic statement about God is the declaration that he is 'being itself'; 'nothing else can be said about God which is not symbolic', he affirmed.¹⁵ But in the second volume even the concept of God as 'being itself', is pronounced as symbol.¹⁶ According to Walter Leibrecht, Tillich 'takes great pains to show to modern man the meaning of each symbol'.¹⁷ But to do this it is essential that he should specify the canons by which symbols are to be interpreted. This is a theme to which he returns again and again.¹⁸

'First and most fundamental', he declares, 'is the character of all symbols to point beyond themselves'.¹⁹ The 'something' to which the symbol points cannot itself be grasped directly. It can be done only through the use of 'symbolic material'. It is impossible for a finite being to grasp in any direct manner infinite Being for 'Being-itself transcends every finite being. There is no proportion or graduation between the finite and the infinite. There is an absolute

⁹ Tillich, 'Religious Symbol' in S Hook (ed) *Religious Experience and Truth* (1962) 315.

¹⁰ *ST* II, 10.

¹¹ C A Campbell, *On Selfhood and Godhood* (1957) ch xvii.

¹² Cf Hook, 'The Atheism of Paul Tillich' in *Religious Experience*, 59f.

¹³ *ST* I, 262.

¹⁴ Cf *ST* I, 227; *The Dynamics of Faith* (1957) 47.

¹⁵ *ST* I, 265; cf 'the religious symbol has special character in that it points to the ultimate level of being, to ultimate reality, to being itself, to meaning itself. That which is the ground of being is the object to which the religious symbol points.' 'Theology and Symbolism' in F E Johnson (ed) *Religious Symbolism* (1955) 109-110.

¹⁶ Cf *ST* II, 10.

¹⁷ 'The Life and Mind of Paul Tillich' in *Religion and Culture*, 23.

¹⁸ Cf Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith* (1957) ch 2.

¹⁹ Tillich, 'The Meaning and Justification of Religious Symbols' in *Religious Experience*, 4.

break, an infinite "jump".²⁰ What we can know of this Being-itself, therefore, must be expressed in symbols taken from finite reality. 'That which is the ground of being is the object to which the religious symbol points'.²¹

It is a further characteristic of the symbol that it should participate in the reality which it represents. A true religious symbol is one which not

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only points to the divine but participates in the power of the divine to which it points.²² In some sense it radiates the power and meaning for which it stands. Tillich shows particular anxiety to labour the point by a constant reiteration. Symbols cannot be created at will. In this respect they are to be distinguished from signs. Symbols are, so to speak, socially created; they are due to the 'unconscious-conscious reaction of the group'.²³ The individual, it is declared, can devise signs for his own ends, but the symbol is *given*; and it carries with it the 'acceptability' of the group. The sign is therefore arbitrary, possessing no 'innate power', and having no 'necessary character'.²⁴ Symbols have the power of opening up dimensions of reality which would otherwise remain obscured or closed. 'Religious symbols mediate ultimate reality through things, persons, events which because of their mediating functions receive the quality of "holy"'.²⁵

Symbols have the power to integrate or disintegrate either individuals or groups. They can create or destroy. The religious symbol in particular has all the characteristics of representative symbols. They are essentially 'figurative', and they must be 'perceptible' in the sense that in the symbol the intrinsically invisible, ideal, or transcendent is represented, and is thus given 'objectivity'. But the distinguishing feature of religious symbols is to be found in the fact 'that they are a representation of that which is unconditionally beyond the conceptual sphere; they point to the reality implied in the religious act, to what concerns us ultimately'.²⁶

THE CHRIST SYMBOL

It is when he comes to treat of Christology that Tillich's concept of symbol has its clearest application. As the second volume of his *Systematic Theology* is studied, it becomes clear that Tillich regards the whole content of Christian faith as a series of symbols. Having argued that such declarations as 'the wrath of God' and 'condemnation' are really symbols of man's experience of despair arising out of his estrangement from 'Being', and his own condition of finitude, Tillich goes on to discuss the 'symbol' of the 'Christ-event'. This estrangement between essence and existence characteristic of human nature is overcome in the 'new being', which is Jesus as the Christ.

²⁰ *ST I*, 263.

²¹ Tillich, 'Theology and Symbolism' in *Religious Symbolism*, 110.

²² Cf 'The symbol participates in the reality which is symbolised.' *ST II*, 10; cf Tillich, 'Religious Symbols and Our Knowledge of God' in *The Christian Scholar*, 38, 191.

²³ 'The Meaning and Justification of Religious Symbols' in op cit, 4 cf *ST II*, 9.

²⁴ Tillich, 'The Religious Symbol' in op cit, 302.

²⁵ 'The Meaning and Justification of Religious Symbols' in op cit, 5.

²⁶ 'The Religious Symbol' in op cit, 303.

All religious symbols are essentially quests for the New Being.²⁷ This means that the symbol 'Messiah' ('Christ') has an origin which transcends both Judaism and Christianity. 'The universal quest for the New Being is a consequence of universal revelation'.²⁸ In Christianity the term 'Christ' is the central symbol and can thus claim universality, for in Christianity 'the different forms in which the quest for the New Being has been made are fulfilled in Jesus as the Christ'.²⁹ In the light of this central symbol 'Christians will judge the attempts of other religions

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to identify the Christ differently from what Christianity asserts. With the symbol of the Christ we are at the cosmic crossroads of all religions'.³⁰ 'Christ' is, then, the bearer of the 'New Being' in his relation to God, man, and the universe, but who, or what, is *the Christ*?

In his article on 'Theology and Symbolism', Tillich, having specified that a symbol points beyond itself to the ground of being, declares that Jesus is the bearer of what in symbolic terms is called 'the Christ'. And, he avers, it would be sheer idolatry to identify the symbol with what it points to; to the reality in which it participates. In chapter xvii of the second volume of his *Systematic Theology*, Tillich seeks to explicate the subject, 'Jesus as the Christ'. This assertion, he allows, is central in the Christian gospel. 'Christianity was born, not with the birth of the man who is called "Jesus", but in the moment in which one of his followers was driven to say to him, "Thou art the Christ"'.³¹ 'Jesus Christ' is then for Tillich not the name of a known individual. It is the combination of the proper name 'Jesus' with the title 'Christ' which expresses in 'the mythological tradition a special figure with a special function'.³²

Such terms as 'Son of Man', 'Son of God', and the like, are symbols of this 'Christ-event'. The symbol, 'Son of Man', for example, is to be regarded as expressive of the original unity between God and man.³³ The term 'Son of God', must not be taken literally for that would be to project 'a human family situation' 'into the inner life of the divine'. The title 'Son of God' belongs to one in whom the essential unity of God and man appeared under the conditions of existence. Here the essentially universal has become the essentially unique. But this uniqueness is not exclusive; for it appears, in final account, that Jesus is the first who appeared to unite the estranged conditions of existence. The development of 'divinity' in Jesus is what, in a measure, the process should be in us if we are united with that same ground of our being which is for us a matter of 'ultimate concern'.³⁴ Thus Tillich declares that it was more or less accidental that the personification of the Christ-symbol took place in Jesus of Nazareth.

Although Tillich regards the personal life of Christ as the 'centre of history' and as the criterion by which the past and the future must be judged, yet he warns against viewing that life as 'isolated'. The New Being is not limited to his being. It is, as Tillich says, 'erupted', or,

²⁷ *ST* II, 100f.

²⁸ 103.

²⁹ loc cit.

³⁰ G H Tvard, *Paul Tillich and the Christian Message* (1961) 61.

³¹ *ST* II, 112.

³² 129.

³³ 127.

³⁴ Cf Tillich, *Ultimate Concern: Dialogue with Students*, D Mackenzie Brown (ed) 1965.

'spilled over' upon the community which recognized 'Jesus' as 'the Christ'. As the bearer of the New Being, Jesus as the Christ, has a special and universal relation to existence, which is expressed in the twofold symbol of the 'cross' and 'resurrection'. The 'cross' is a symbol of Christ's subjection to the actualities of existence.³⁵ While the symbols which corroborate the symbol of the cross of the Christ are to be taken to mean that 'he who is the Christ subjects himself to the ultimate negativities of existence and that they are not able to separate him from his unity with God'.³⁶ The 'resurrection' is for Tillich the symbol for the

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conquest of the New Being over the existential estrangement to which he subjected himself. The 'ascension' is viewed as another symbol expressing the same event as that which the resurrection points to. If taken literally the 'special symbolism' of the ascension would be absurd. Likewise is the statement about Christ 'sitting on the right hand of God' a symbol suggestive of God's creative activity in association with the New Being in Christ. 'The ultimate judgement of the world by Christ is one of the most dramatic symbols'.³⁷ Yet this ultimate judgement does not refer to the 'not yet'. 'It is an immanent judgement which is always going on in history, even where the name Jesus is not known but where the power of the New Being, which is his being, is present or absent (Matthew, chapter 25)'.³⁸

ULTIMATE INTERPRETATION OF THE CHRIST SYMBOLISM

In Jesus, declares Tillich, essential Godmanhood has appeared as 'Christ', within existence and under the conditions of existence without being conquered by them.³⁹ In a personal life has the New Being found complete individualization. 'Jesus as the Christ is the bearer of the New Being in the totality of his being, not in any special expressions of it. It is his being that makes him the Christ because his being has the quality of the New Being beyond the split of essential and existential being'.⁴⁰ His words, deeds, and sufferings are all expressions of that New Being which is the quality of his being. Various Christologies have singled out one or other of these manifestations of the New Being that is the Christ and have thought to interpret his 'person' by its use. Thus rationalism has separated his words, pietism his deeds, and orthodoxy his sufferings, from his being. But, Tillich, affirms, 'The suffering on the cross is not something additional which can be separated from the appearance of the eternal Godmanhood under the conditions of existence; it is an inescapable implication of this appearance. Like his words and his deeds, the suffering of Jesus as the Christ is an expression of the New Being in him'.⁴¹ The truth of the matter is that his being is his work; and his work is his being. So that in the final analysis, as J Heywood Thomas says, for Tillich Christology 'is a function of soteriology'.⁴²

In replying to the criticism that his Christology is Nestorian⁴³ and Adoptionist⁴⁴, Tillich allows that from the point of view of the accepted dogma the charge may be correct; and he

³⁵ *ST* II, 183.

³⁶ 182.

³⁷ 189.

³⁸ *Loc cit.*

³⁹ *Cf op cit*, 108.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 139.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 142.

⁴² J Heywood Thomas, *Paul Tillich: An Appraisal* (1963) 99.

⁴³ See ch 3 above, n 12.

has no stake in denying the accusation. But in the same context he draws attention to the then forthcoming third volume of his *Systematic Theology* in which the decisive elements of the synoptic picture are restated under the heading of 'A Spirit Christology'.⁴⁵

What he has to say there seems, however, to be a development of a remark he makes in the second volume. 'One could also speak of essential God-manhood in order to indicate the divine presence in

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essential manhood; but this is redundant, and the clarity of thought is served best in speaking of essential manhood'.⁴⁶ Directed, then, by Tillich himself to the latest addition to his *Systematic Theology* we find that he identifies the New Being carried by Jesus as the Christ with the presence in him of the divine spirit as the spiritual presence. 'Though subject to individual and social conditions his human spirit was entirely grasped by the Divine Presence; his spirit was "possessed" by the divine Spirit, or, to use another figure, "God was in him"'.⁴⁷ While not rejecting the Logos Christology, Tillich asserts that its 'complete victory in the later dogmatic development',⁴⁸ led to the obscuring of important aspects of the synoptic picture. He insists, therefore, that 'The Synoptic stories show that the earliest Christian tradition was determined by a Spirit-Christology'.⁴⁹ It is through the driving force of the Spiritual Presence that he lived and had such 'ecstatic experiences' as that alluded to on the Mount of Transfiguration. The two manifestations of this Spiritual Presence are the faith and love he displayed. Tillich thus defines 'faith' as the state of being 'grasped' by the divine Presence; and in his case he was 'grasped unambiguously by the Spiritual Presence'.⁵⁰

Two theological implications follow for Tillich from this understanding of the divine element in his makeup. 'One is the assertion that it is not the spirit of the man Jesus of Nazareth that makes him the Christ, but that it is the spiritual Presence, God in him, that possesses and drives his individual spirit'.⁵¹ The other is 'that Jesus, the Christ, is the keystone in the arch of Spiritual manifestations in history'.⁵² Thus the 'Spirit' which created the Christ in Jesus is the same Spirit who continues the work of preparing man for encounter with the New Being in him. It was the Spirit which made him the Christ which would bring the Christ to birth in every man.

'The whole picture given by Tillich of Jesus becoming "the Christ" ', says R Allan Killen, 'is one of the gradual divination of a man. A divination which occurs in all if they are to have what Tillich calls "eternal life", which is to enjoy union with the Ground of their being or God'.⁵³

⁴⁴ Ibid, n 9.

⁴⁵ Tillich, 'Appreciation and Reply', in *Paul Tillich and Catholic Thought* (eds) T O'Meara and C D Weisser (1965) 309.

⁴⁶ *ST* II, 108; cf 'If the being of Jesus as the Christ is the New Being, the human spirit of the man Jesus cannot make him the Christ; then it must be the divine Spirit, which, like the Logos, cannot be inferior to God.' *ST* II, 165.

⁴⁷ *ST* II, 154.

⁴⁸ 'Appreciation and Reply', in op cit, 306; cf *ST* I, 157f; II, 109, 128; III, 155, 158.

⁴⁹ *ST* III, 154.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 155.

⁵¹ Ibid, 156.

⁵² Loc cit.

⁵³ R A Killen, *The Ontological Theology of Paul Tillich* (1956) 167.

CHRISTOLOGY AND THE HISTORIC FAITH

When it comes to the question of the genuineness of the incarnation Tillich has no reservations in his denial. The idea of the Son of God as Second Person of the divine Trinity literally and actually taking human flesh he declares to be 'Nonsense!'. He asks the question, 'Who is the subject of the Incarnation?' The orthodox answer, 'God has become man' he regards as a nonsensical statement.⁵⁴ The word 'God', he has contended, points to ultimate Being, and even the most consistent Scotist would allow that the one thing God cannot do is to cease to be God. And this, he believes, is what the assertion 'God has become man'

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would have us accept. It is therefore unacceptable to speak of God taking flesh; rather may it be said that a 'divine being' has become man; in the sense, that is to say, that in Jesus there has emerged 'the new aeon'. 'The unqualified use of the term "Incarnation" in Christianity creates pagan, or at least superstitious connotations.'⁵⁵

In an article entitled, 'A Reinterpretation of the Doctrine of the Incarnation', Tillich avows his unequivocal rejection of the historical doctrine of God becoming man. It is not God, as such, he declares, but rather 'a divine being' with human characteristics, the spiritual and heavenly man, or a moral being who chooses self-humiliation, or the creative reason or word, who appears in space, and is subject to the law of the flesh and of sin, namely human existence. The paradox of the incarnation is not that God becomes man, but that a divine being who represents God is able to reveal him in his fulness, manifest himself in the form of existence which is in radical contradiction to his divine, spiritual, and heavenly form.⁵⁶ In the same article, Tillich confessed that when he first arrived in America he was amazed by the importance given to the concept of the incarnation for the theology and liturgy of the Protestant Episcopal Church. In spite of this he admits to being unable to give to the doctrine of the incarnation any clear interpretation.⁵⁷ Yet he does insist that it is his view that the idea of the incarnation is a mythological expression for the emergence into 'historical existence' of the 'new aeon', for that is, according to Tillich, what John means by the term 'flesh'. It does not mean at all 'material substance'.⁵⁸ In the end, for Tillich 'incarnation' is regarded as a symbol for 'the eternal relation of God to man which is manifest in the Christ'.⁵⁹ No wonder, then, that Tavad can assert that 'Tillich's embarrassment with the doctrine of the Incarnation is patent.'⁶⁰ For as O'Meara says, 'Looking at Tillich's theology from the point of view of the incarnation, we see that he has denied as excessive and idolatrous any claim about such an entrance of the divine into the world. Jesus is not the Logos incarnate among us... It is essential to Tillich's consistent view of mankind and his existential need of a Christianity that

⁵⁴ *ST* II, 109f; cf 'Who is the subject of Incarnation? If the answer is "God" one often continues by saying that "God has become man", and that this is the paradox of the Christian message. But the assertion that "God has become man" is not a paradoxical but a nonsensical statement.' *ST* II, 109.

⁵⁵ *ST* III, 156.

⁵⁶ Cf *Church Quarterly Review* (1959) 133-148.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 134.

⁵⁸ *ST* I, 110.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*.

⁶⁰ Tavad, *op cit*, 120.

God be not enmeshed in what is human. Has not Tillich enclosed the divinity in a theological circle whose destruction was the very purpose of the Incarnation?'⁶¹

The historic view that there was a real Jesus Christ, one person existing in the unity of two natures, a human and a divine, is also pronounced as 'Absurd!' by Tillich. A real man, Jesus, there may have been. But nothing can be said for sure about him; for the 'biblical picture of Christ' is not an historical presentation.⁶² 'The search for the historical Jesus was an attempt to discover a minimum of reliable facts about the man Jesus of Nazareth, in order to provide a safe foundation for the Christian faith'. But the attempt was, and always must be a 'failure'.⁶³ The picture presents at most 'a faint possibility'.⁶⁴

The epithet 'the Christ' has for Tillich no personal actuality; it is a

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title of function merely. He is therefore sure that, 'It is inadequate and a source of a false Christology to say that the mediator is an ontological reality beside God and man.'⁶⁵ He is consequently unsure of the cogency and usefulness of the two-nature doctrine. How indeed can it be otherwise? For with a Jesus hardly knowable and the Christ as an expression of the New Being, the idea of a twofold nature in the one person of Jesus Christ cannot but be absurd. He thus affirms that a Christology based on the *homoousios* which posed the Christological problem of 'the dialectical relation of finiteness and infinity' is a 'Christology of absurdities' because 'the starting point was wrong'.⁶⁶ Yet he will still allow the expression to remain if interpreted to mean that, 'Only the God who is really God can create the New Being, not a half-god'.⁶⁷

Tillich does admit that the two great councils, Nicaea and Chalcedon, did safeguard something of the truth for the church; for 'both the Christian character and the Jesus character of the event of Jesus as the Christ were preserved'. The doctrine of the two natures in Christ raises the right question but uses wrong conceptual tools. 'The basic inadequacy lies in the term "nature" when applied to man; it is ambiguous; when applied to God it is wrong.'⁶⁸ Tillich thinks that by replacing the concept 'divine nature' by that of 'eternal God-man-unity', or, 'eternal God-manhood' he has made comprehensible the unity between God and man established in the New Being. 'Such concepts replace a static essence by a dynamic relation. The uniqueness of this relation is in no way reduced by its dynamic character; but, by eliminating the concept of 'two natures' which lie outside each other like blocks and whose unity cannot be understood at all, we are open to relational concepts which make understandable the dynamic picture of Jesus as the Christ'⁶⁹. Despite this, however, Tillich does not make clear that what he asserts is now understandable. For the truth is as Heywood Thomas says, 'The reasons which Tillich brings forward to support his rejection of the two-natures theory are strange and in the end, as far as I can see, only verbal.'⁷⁰

⁶¹ 'Paul Tillich and Ecumenism' in *Paul Tillich and Catholic Thought*, 298-299.

⁶² Cf *ST II*, 101f.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 114f.

⁶⁴ Cf Tillich, *The Interpretation of History* (1936) 260; cf 165.

⁶⁵ *ST II*, 108.

⁶⁶ 'A Reinterpretation of the Doctrine of the Incarnation' in *op cit*, 138.

⁶⁷ *ST II*, 165.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 164.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 170.

⁷⁰ J Heywood Thomas, *op cit*, 97.

Was there an actual rising of Jesus from the dead, a literal coming back from the grave of the One who was crucified? 'Blasphemy!' declares Tillich. Asserting that, 'the resurrection of gods and half-gods is a familiar mythological symbol'⁷¹, Tillich goes on to argue that I Corinthians chapter 15 is a late attempt to rationalise the 'event of the resurrection'; to interpret it with physical categories that identify 'resurrection' with the presence or absence of a physical body. So says Tillich, 'the absurd question arises as to what happened to the molecules which comprise the corpse of Jesus of Nazareth. Then absurdity becomes compounded with blasphemy'.⁷² Besides rejecting an actual rising of Jesus from the dead, the physical theory, as Tillich calls it, has no religious significance. No less unacceptable is the 'spiritualistic'

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theory which explains the appearances as manifestations of the 'soul' of the man Jesus to his followers; and the 'psychological' theory which regards the resurrection as an inner event in the minds of Christ's admirers. He thereupon presents what he calls the 'restitution' doctrine according to which the resurrection is regarded as the 'restitution of Jesus as the Christ'; a restitution which is rooted in the personal unity of Jesus and God, and the impact of this unity on the minds of the apostles.⁷³

A CRITICAL COMMENT AND ASSESSMENT

G H Tavad, although expressing hearty disapproval of the main drift of Tillich's interpretation of Christian doctrine, is yet sure that his personal faith is fundamentally Christian.⁷⁴ Tillich's theology as expounded in his *Dogmatics* may indeed be pronounced unchristian but, declares Tavad, the passion and spirit of his published sermons reveal that 'Tillich the preacher is infinitely more faithful to the Word than Tillich as system-maker'.⁷⁵ On the other side, Leonard F Wheat in a hostile critique of Tillich contends that he set out deliberately to destroy the basis of Christian faith from within.⁷⁶ It is not easy at times to speak the truth in love. Yet Christian charity requires on our part that we credit to Tillich the best of Christian intentions. At the same time from the perspective of biblical and historical understanding of the person of Christ we are compelled to declare that Tillich's Christology is seriously defective. It is usual to find Tillich's system referred to as 'profound' and 'constructive', and in spite of the excess of enthusiasm displayed in these verdicts such high accreditations may be allowed to stand. Certainly the ontological framework of Tillich's theology includes the disciplines of culture more creatively and fruitfully than any other. He is also right in his appreciation of the limits of the human reason in probing the ultimate mystery of existence.

In commenting on Tillich's Christology there are wider aspects of his theology which must deliberately be left out of consideration. Such especially is his concept of God as 'the Ground of Being'; if only for the reason that, with Dorothy Emmet, we are not clear what Tillich

⁷¹ Tillich, *ST II*, 177.

⁷² *Ibid*, 180.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 182.

⁷⁴ Tavad, *op cit*, 138.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 139.

⁷⁶ Cf Tillich, *Dialectical Humanism: Unmasking the God above God* (1970) 267.

means by the expression.⁷⁷ On the other hand, seeing that his Christology is set in the wider framework of his symbolic theology it does seem required that some assessment be given of his idea of symbol in relation to his understanding of the person of Christ.

Reflecting on Tillich's doctrine of symbol as outlined above, it seems evident that he does not permit the necessary distinction between the *symbolizanda* of orthodox biblical theology and its accepted symbolic presentations. He alleges that the Christian believer takes as literally and factually true, such terms as 'God', 'Son of God', and the like, which are really symbolic of his ultimate concern for the actuality of his

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human existence. But the simplest believer is not, we venture to suggest, so easily beguiled. He knows rightly, instinctively, and biblically, when he speaks of God in literal terms or in symbolic ideas. He knows that, when he speaks of God as a 'high tower', or even as a 'shepherd', he is not using such terms in a literal sense; and yet the symbolism has for him a literal significance. God is indeed a 'high tower' and a 'shepherd' in relation to his people. Tillich appears to regard all statements about God as on the same level; to speak of God as a personal redeemer is as much a symbol for him as to speak of God as a 'rock'.

In the light of Tillich's reduction of all theological affirmations to an array of symbols it becomes a question of whether we can know 'God' at all; or, indeed, whether there is a 'God' at all to be known. Tillich asserts emphatically that the personal 'God' of Theism is a symbol only. If God is not personal he cannot be personally known. 'For it is doubtful', as John Baillie says, 'whether any race of men has ever believed that man could discover anything about God if God were not at the same time making himself known'.⁷⁸ But can non-personal 'being-itself' act in this way? Can we 'encounter' a symbol? It seems that Sidney Hook is justified in speaking of 'the Atheism of Paul Tillich'. For, as he points out, '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?'⁷⁹

Tillich must regard his religious symbols as productions of man's ultimate concern arising out of his estrangement from 'being-itself', and his desire to find harmonious unity thereto. Tillich himself admits that he learned from Feuerbach the secret that the true source of theology is to be found in the nature of man. Jacob Taubes can thus well ask, 'Are Feuerbach's premises a good omen for a theological enterprise?'⁸⁰ In the light of his fundamental presupposition, Tillich can insist that the question of God's existence is of no religious significance.⁸¹ It is precisely not so because, since being-itself is, it cannot logically be proved to exist or be denied to be. Thus God, in the sense of Being-Itself, is not a Being, but the very reality basic of all existence. Only in this sense can 'God' be spoken of as the 'unconditioned transcendent'. But this, in the last analysis, is to make Tillich's 'God' no more

⁷⁷ Cf 'Ground of Being' in *JTS* (1964) 2, 280f. cf 'My trouble with Tillich is not so much that he can be called atheist or theist according to how these words are defined, but that he makes it difficult for us to discover what the notion of "ground" or "power" of being does come to.', 289.

⁷⁸ John Baillie, *The Sense of the Presence of God* (1962) 124-125.

⁷⁹ 'The Atheism of Paul Tillich' in *Religious Experience*, 61.

⁸⁰ 'The Copernican Turn in Theology' in *Religious Experience*, 74.

⁸¹ Cf Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith*, 47.

than 'the all-in-all of pantheistic spiritualism'.⁸² What we have is a sort of Christianised neo-Platonism, speculative after the fashion of John Scotus Erigena,⁸³ and mystical after the style of Dionysius.⁸⁴

We will not state here other difficulties in Tillich's use of symbols which we have detailed elsewhere:⁸⁵ but we do think that Raphael Demos is right in insisting that Tillich does not give sufficient account of the place of *beliefs* in religion. And, as he says, 'Religion cannot stand up without belief.'⁸⁶ But if the beliefs are not well founded, not factually

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accepted, what then? If the whole content of Christian theology is to be regarded as symbolic, then, what is to prevent the whole of our faith being as 'an agreeable story'? 'The danger of the symbolic interpretation is the dehistoricisation of Christianity, the denial of the Incarnation. Yet one of the cardinal claims of Christian theology is that Christianity is unique among the great religions in according to history an ultimate significance. Such a claim would be a worthless check [sic] when we find ourselves unable to cash it at the bank of actual history'.⁸⁷ Tillich's downgrading of the historical element in the end makes the factual content of Christian faith so thin as to be, like the emperor's clothes, non-existent.

It is in fact on the question of the significance of the historical in relation to Christology that Tillich's account is the least satisfactory. His scepticism regarding historical knowledge is well known. He initiates a sharp divorce between historical 'truth' and the 'truth' of faith. The 'truth' of faith is then declared, 'entirely independent of the problems of historical inquiry into the facts behind the rise of the biblical picture of Christ'.⁸⁸ Historical knowledge is, at best, problematical; whereas faith carries 'certitude about its own foundations'.⁸⁹ It would be 'a disastrous distortion of the meaning of "faith" to identify its "truth" with "the belief in the historical validity of the biblical stories.'⁹⁰ Tillich asserts that 'the foundation of Christian faith is not the historical Jesus, but the biblical picture of Christ'; 'the picture of Christ as it is rooted in ecclesiastical belief and human experience'.⁹¹ What he seems to be affirming is that what is 'historical' is the biblical picture of the Christ symbol, and not that the biblical picture is of an historical Christ.⁹² This is, of course, a quite different idea from what is ordinarily understood by those who claim that Christology is about what Jesus of Nazareth was as the Word of God in human flesh.

⁸² S Hook, 'The Atheism of Paul Tillich' in *Religious Experience*, 60.

⁸³ Cf R Kroner, *Speculation and Revelation in the Age of Christian Philosophy* (1959) 146 (footnote).

⁸⁴ H D McDonald, *Theories of Revelation* (1963) 97.

⁸⁵ 'The Symbolic Theology of Paul Tillich' in *SJT* (1964) 414-430, especially 424, 427.

⁸⁶ 'Religious Symbols And/Or Religious Beliefs' in *Religious Experience*, 55.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 56.

⁸⁸ Tillich, *Interpretation of History*, 264-265.

⁸⁹ *Dynamics of Faith*, 89.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 87.

⁹¹ *Interpretation of History*, 34; cf 'Since it is the central Christian religious symbol, the picture of Jesus as the Christ is stated at the mythological "semantic level". Theologically important content of the picture does not include historical fact-claims.' Kelsey, *Fabric*, 71.

⁹² Cf 'While Bultmann and Cullmann have always drawn the conclusion from the New Testament sources that in Jesus and the Christ historical fact and interpretation are so closely interwoven that they cannot and should not be separated, Tillich based his Christology on the "biblical picture of Christ". Thereby, "the new being" becomes in truth the foundation of Christian faith, while the historical fact of Jesus, though not outspokenly, is dismissed and becomes in truth irrelevant.' M Sulzbach, 'The Place of Christology in Contemporary Protestantism' in *Religion and Life* (1953-4) 212.

Both Heywood Thomas and Tavad regard Tillich's discounting of the actuality of the Jesus figure as a grave error in Tillich's interpretation. Heywood Thomas says, 'At the very least we must surely admit that it is necessary for us to have grounds for accepting as true the historical assertion that there was such a person as Jesus of Nazareth'.⁹³ Tavad sees Tillich's 'historicism' as undergoing quite extraordinary contortions with the result that he 'ends up in a very strange position. Rejecting the pre-existence of Jesus as the Christ of God, he insists on the human element in Jesus as the Christ. Then, turning his eyes to historical research, he despairs of reaching security there and abandons Jesus as Jesus'.⁹⁴ Bruce Cameron sees weaknesses in both Tavad's and Donald Baillie's critique of Tillich's historicism; yet, while admitting with Tillich that fact and interpretation are distinct, he asserts against Tillich that 'the truth of interpretation depends upon its factual basis'.⁹⁵

Tillich disavows belief in an ontological Trinity and has no place for the historical Christian doctrine of a pre-existent Logos becoming

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united with personal human nature. This new creed of Chicago has little in common with the old creed of Chalcedon. Tillich has, rather, his own type of Sabellianism.⁹⁶ He allows that the Godhead can be regarded as having three 'manifestations' or 'faces', but he denies that there is a second hypostatis of the Godhead who became actual in a 'material substance'. Tillich reads the New Testament as the account of one 'Jesus' growing into divinity, becoming divine, bringing the New Being into existence by becoming 'the Christ'. In Tillich's view, the Christ is the symbol of the eternal unity between God and man. As a symbol, while he points to and participates in Being-Itself, he is not to be identified with it. Tillich, to be sure, protests that the Christ, as the New Being, is an ontological reality, and in his own strange use of words, so he is. But the difference between the symbol of the Christ-event and other symbols is only a matter of degree. And does not Tillich allow that the symbol of the Buddha as well as 'the Christ' are symbols in so far as the unconditioned transcendent is envisaged in them?

By an extraordinary twist, Tillich's Christology turns out to be a sort of dynamic monarchianism; a sophisticated brand of an Achievement Christology in which the human nature of the man Jesus was so transfused by the 'divine' as to accord him the status of 'divinity'. This is, of course, a logical sequence of his thesis that 'God' is not simply a being or even the being, but Being-Itself, the Ground of all being.

And since God is not *a* being, the idea of God becoming man is regarded as an impossible contradiction. In fact God qua Being-Itself is not the object of theology for the reason that Being-Itself does not 'appear' in the context of experience. The Object of theology is the 'manifestation' of Being-Itself in the symbol of the Christ-event. In this sense the Christ stands in a special position; but as neither truly God nor truly man. Tillich contends that to ascribe 'divine nature' to the Christ would put him beyond existence, while to credit him with 'human nature' would put him below essence. Thus is Jesus as the Christ to be regarded as a sort of *tertium quid* being. Apollinarius spoke of his Christological construction of the person of Christ as a 'strange mixture'; but Tillich's presentation is of a Christ who is an even

⁹³ J H Thomas, op cit, 89.

⁹⁴ Tavad, op cit, 131.

⁹⁵ B J R Cameron, 'The Historical Problem in Paul Tillich's Christology', *SJT* (1965) 3, 272.

⁹⁶ Cf Tavad, op cit, 118.

stranger mixture still. His new type of a Christian theosophy is totally at odds with historic Christian faith.

Tillich's Christology is indeed an extraordinary blend of all the heresies repudiated by the great councils. He can be classed as an Adoptionist, a Sabellian, an Eutychian, a Docetic, a Gnostic, a Monophysite, and even, according to Gustav Weigel, a Nestorian.⁹⁷ He can in truth be described as anything except an exponent of the historical and biblical doctrine of the person of Christ. He is, of course, altogether right in insisting that reason is impotent in probing the mystery of the Ultimate; and that there must ever remain an element of the incomprehensible in the ontologically real. Because this is so,

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symbol will ever have a relevant place in a true biblical theology. The phrase 'a true biblical theology' is, however, an important one. For in this regard it is to be observed that Tillich constructs his Christology with the meagrest reference to the New Testament. It is thus rightly said that while his system is 'long on metaphysical exactness and existential relatedness' it is 'short on biblical concreteness and theological precision'.⁹⁸ It is not, that is to say, a true biblical theology.

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Prepared for the Web in March 2009 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

⁹⁷ Cf Weigel, 'Contemporary Protestantism and Paul Tillich', in *Theological Studies* (1950) 194.

⁹⁸ Jerome Ficek, 'The Christology of Paul Tillich: The New Being in Jesus as the Christ' in *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* (1958) 2, 22.