
PAUL TILLICH is one of those names with a built-in intellectual aura. Nor is this without justification. For Tillich, who was born in 1886 (the same year as Karl Barth) has two long and distinguished careers behind him. After a PHD at Breslau in 1911, a Licentiat at Halle the following year and service as a chaplain in World War I Tillich embarked on a teaching career which took him to the universities of Berlin, Marburg, Dresden, Leipzig and Frankfurt. It was a period marked by a deep interest in philosophy, particularly German Idealism. But these years also saw Tillich becoming increasingly concerned with existentialism and religious socialism. This first career was abruptly terminated by the advent of Adolf Hitler. The year 1933 saw Tillich (now forty-seven) launch out upon his second career. Thanks to Reinhold Niebuhr, he obtained a post at the Union Theological Seminary, New York. Eventually he became a full professor there, teaching philosophical theology. In 1940 he became an American citizen, and on retiring from his post at the Union Seminary in 1954 he became a professor at Harvard.

Over the years Tillich has collected some fifteen doctorates, and a steady stream of books has flowed from his pen. These range from collections of sermons like The Shaking of the Foundations (1949; Pelican 1962) and The New Being (1956) to essays and lectures like The Protestant Era (1948), The Courage to Be (1952) and Love, Power and Justice (1954). But Tillich's great work which largely overlaps all these is his Systematic Theology. Begun in the twenties, the third and final volume has just appeared (British edition, Nisbet, Vol 1, 1953. 330pp. 35s.; Vol II, 1957. 216pp. 25s.; Vol III, 1964. 464pp. 42s.).

1. THEOLOGY

To pick up Tillich's Systematic Theology after studying traditional textbooks is like straying into a room full of Picassos. Everywhere the perspectives are strange. While some features are oddly familiar, others are conspicuously absent. There are next to no biblical texts. There are few references to classical theologians and fewer still to contemporary scholars. But there is a lot of talk about 'ontology', 'structures' and 'concrete'. The whole thing is more like philosophy than theology. And, in fact, this is intentional. For the difference between the two, according to Tillich, is largely one of perspective; both are concerned with being (ST I, pp. 25ff.).

In their attempts to grapple with the problems presented by being, the ways of the philosopher and the theologian tend to part at three points. (1) Whereas the philosopher tries to be detached as he looks at the structure of being, the theologian is 'existential'. He looks at being as one who is desperately involved with the whole of his existence, with his finitude and his anxiety, with his self-contradictions and his despair, with the healing forces in him and his social situation. (2) There is also a difference of sources. The philosopher is concerned with the structure of reality as a whole; he seeks to grasp the logos or reason which permeates all being. The theologian looks not at logos in general, but at the Logos who became flesh and is manifested in the life of the church. (3) Whereas the philosopher deals with the structure of being in general (time and space, etc.), the theologian is concerned with the human aspect of being, the great problems of life. Above all, he is concerned with what Tillich calls the quest for a 'new being'. Later on we shall have occasion to look more closely at some of these
terms. In the meantime, it is important to underline the fact that for Tillich theology is never a matter of repeating the gospel but has to be stripped of its non-essentials and transposed into terms which mean something to modern man. Thus Tillich finds it more significant to speak in terms of being than of the words and deeds of a God out there. The object of theology is what concerns us ultimately. Theology is never a matter of repeating the words of a God out there. The object of theology is what concerns us ultimately.

For being itself transcends existence. For the same reason it is wrong to attempt to prove God's existence. For existence, with all its limits, belongs only to things and beings, not being itself. It is this thought which underlies Tillich's rejection of the traditional arguments for the existence of God (ST I, pp. 227-233). The attempt to find a first cause leads at best to a cause inadequate for the universe, but still of the same order as the universe. In the last analysis, such a cause is still finite, whereas for Tillich God is beyond all finite causality, logically and theologically defective, the traditional arguments have, however, at least this to say for them: they sense both a distinction and a relationship between finite and infinite being.

II. GOD

The notion of God as what concerns us ultimately acquired a certain fame at second-hand through Honest to God (pp. 21f.). In fact, it recurs throughout the three volumes of Systematic Theology. But perhaps it receives its most striking exposition in The Shaking of the Foundations (pp. 63f.). If we do not know what the word 'God' means, or what Tillich means when he speaks of God, we cannot speak about God without reservation. No matter if this contradicts our previous notions of God. No matter if we claim to be theists. Those who know what God means, as well as those who know about this cannot really be atheists. For being is what we really mean when we talk about God.

Other terms which Tillich applies to God are being itself, the power of being and the growth of being (ST I, pp. 26ff., and often). Basic to Tillich's whole concept of God is the conviction that God is neither a thing nor a being. God is beyond things and beings; He is being itself. If He were a thing or a being He would not be God. According to Tillich God as the highest being would reduce Him to the level of a creature. Tillich holds that God is beyond the limitations of the human conceptual thought, for both existence and conceptual thought belong to the realm of the finite. On the other hand, concepts of being are finite as long as they are not transposed into being itself. Otherwise, it would not have the power of being. It would simply be swallowed up by non-being, or indeed it would never have emerged out of non-being (ST I, p. 263).

It is as atheistic, Tillich insists, to affirm the existence of God as to deny it. For being itself transcends existence. For the same reason it is wrong to attempt to prove God's existence. For existence, with all its limits, belongs only to things and beings, not being itself. It is this thought which underlies Tillich's rejection of the traditional arguments for the existence of God (ST I, pp. 227-233). The attempt to find a first cause leads at best to a cause inadequate for the universe, but still of the same order as the universe. In the last analysis, such a cause is still finite, whereas for Tillich God is beyond all finite causality, logically and theologically defective, the traditional arguments have, however, at least this to say for them: they sense both a distinction and a relationship between finite and infinite being.

III. MAN

When Tillich turns to man and his sin, he sees them in terms of being and estrangement from being related to being, we live in a state of estrangement from it. Man is estranged from the ground of his being, from the infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all of being, he advises us to translate it and think of God in terms of our ultimate concern or what we call estrangement. No matter if this contradicts our previous notions of God. No matter if we claim to be theists. Those who know what God means, as well as those who know about this cannot really be atheists. For being is what we really mean when we talk about God.

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IV. CHRIST

Being and estrangement from being again reappear as the twin keys to the Person and work of Christ. For Christ is the only-one who estrangement is overcome, and through whom those who confess Him share this victory. Or, to use Tillich's often repeated phrase, Jesus as Christ is the bearer of the New Being. This is what Tillich means when he speaks of God as the 'infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all of being', he advises us to translate it and think of God in terms of our ultimate concern or what we call estrangement. No matter if this contradicts our previous notions of God. No matter if we claim to be theists. Those who know what God means, as well as those who know about this cannot really be atheists. For being is what we really mean when we talk about God.
V. REVELATION AND SYMBOLS

It is, in fact, symbols and the concept of being which present the key to Tillich's doctrine of revelation (57 I, pp. 79-177; cf. Tillich, Religion: Experience and Truth, ed. Sidney Hook, 1962). Tillich defines revelation as ‘the manifestation of what concerns us ultimately’ (cf. Tavard, op. cit., p. 150). He is concerned that what concerns us ultimately is not this or that thing or being but being itself. But being itself, though rational, is beyond reason. It is beyond the grasp of conceptual thinking. It cannot be reduced to this or that idea. In revelation, therefore, what we have is not (as in the Bible) the signification of self-disclosure of a divine Person through words and actions, but an ontological shock in which our being is gripped by the divine.

This may occur through some word or action, or through seeing the significance of some religious image like a cross, or above all through a person. But these symbols are not revelation itself, since they are finite objects. Rather, they present the occasion through which being itself bursts into our finite consciousness. Every Jesus appears to be such a symbol. Of Himself He is nothing. The significant thing about Him is that He remained transparent to the divine mystery until his death, which was the final manifestation of his transparency’ (57 I, pp. 149f.). As such, Jesus is not the New Being, but the Begetter of the New Being. Even Christianity as Christianity is ‘neither final nor universal’. Rather it is the witness to that which is final and universal (ibid.).

VI. TILlich's CRITICS


Although he gives a useful sketch of Tillich’s life and general approach, Fr. Tavard’s main concern is Tillich’s christology. He welcomes the attempt to correlate (to use Tillich’s term) problems presented by human existence and the answer to be found in being. But when all is said and done, Tillich’s attempt must be pronounced a failure. It is not biblical enough, not historical enough, and not theological enough. It develops a philosophy of a Hegelian type, rather than a theology. The end is ‘a diluted Christology which might be acceptable to the Hindu, but the Christian would reject it’. If they can accept everything in Tillich’s exposition, except precisely the fact that Jesus himself and no other was, and ever shall be, the Christ; Tillich’s handling of the historical and the eternal (p. 173). There is no real incarnation in Tillich’s thinking. The historical work of Jesus has no real importance for Tillich. It is the idea of Christ which counts. In other words, Tillich’s Christ in a Docetic Christology. In the summer of 1963 the SCM Press published simultaneously The System and the Gospel by Kenneth Hamilton, a Professor at United College, Winnipeg, and Paul Tillich: A Range of Problems of Religion and Culture in the University of Manchester. In their different ways both give a wide-ranging critique of Tillich in the context of his whole system, and Thomas ends by giving an interesting appendix on Catholic Criticism of Tillich.

Both Tillich’s system and his method are fundamentally critical of Tillich’s whole approach. Hamilton (who has studied under Tillich and whom Tillich has called his ‘logical critic’) sees Tillich’s system not as a new epoch-making apologetic but as a hang-over from the nineteenth century. Hamilton’s verdict is: ‘To see Tillich’s system as a whole is to see that it is incompatible with the Christian gospel’ (p. 227).

Sweeping as these judgments are, they are scarcely less than just. The root difficulty, as both writers point out, lies in Tillich’s whole approach, his system. For Tillich starts with a definition of being, and then forces the gospel to lie on a Procrustean bed of preconceived ideas, lopping off any item which does not fit. The disastrous consequences of this method are far-reaching.

On one hand, it saddles Christianity with a dubious philosophy of uncertain worth and questionable foundation. Both writers repeatedly take Tillich to task for his looseness in handling terms. Astonishing as it may sound, Tillich never gives an adequate defence of the concept of being. At times it seems to involve a form of pantheism. It is certainly difficult to see with what propriety Tillich uses the word God in any Christian sense. Despite affinities with existentialism, it would seem to have more in common with the nineteenth-century Idealist concept of Spirit or the Absolute. Yet whatever the affinities may be, it is difficult to see how Tillich’s thought can be defended (let alone used) so long as his basic concept remains devoid of sound intellectual foundation.

On the other hand, Tillich’s method does less than justice to the witness of the New Testament. As we have already seen, Tillich is forced to ride rough-shod over the biblical witness to the incarnation, atonement and resurrection. But the extent of this can only really be appreciated by comparing Tillich’s teaching point by point with that of Scripture.

If these criticisms are valid, Tillich’s apologetic is not so much a bridge between the Christian message and the modern mind, as a dead end. Instead of being a theology of correlating the human predicament to the divine answer, it misunderstands the modern mind by saddling it with a philosophy of being to which few secular thinkers today would subscribe. And it mutilates the gospel. The root difficulty lies with Tillich’s faulty method. For theology the primary datum is the self-revelation of God in Christ, as witnessed to by the primary documents, i.e. Scripture. This is demanded by the very nature of the case (cf. Matt. 5: 17; 16: 17; Lk. 24: 27; Jn. 5: 39-47; 1 Cor. 1: 15-31; 2 Cor. 3: 12-4: 6; Eph. 1: 9f.; Col. 1: 26; 1 Thess. 2: 13f.; Heb. 1: 1f.; 1 Pet. 1: 25; 2 Pet. 1: 21ff.). Theological truth is not general truth, capable of being discovered by reflecting upon life in general. Whilst it illuminates life in general, it can only be discovered from the Word of God. Tillich, however, reverses the process and makes his version of general truth the test of revelation. In doing so, he commits a serious error on two levels. On the scientific level he misconceives the object of his study, and consequently employs defective techniques throughout. On the religious level he turns Christian theism into a variety of pantheism, and consequently substitutes for the living God an amorphous idea.

But when all is said and done, there are many passages in Tillich (particularly his sermons) which are both searching and illuminating. How Tillich manages to reconcile them with his system is a question only he can answer. Neither Tillich himself nor the critics mentioned in this article have thrown much light on it. But perhaps in fairness to Tillich, it is best to let Fr. Tavard have the last word when he says (p. 139): ‘Tillich as preacher is infinitely more faithful to the Word than Tillich as system-builder’.