

## SOME RECENT REACTIONS TO PAUL TILlich'S VIEWS OF MYTH AND HISTORY

WILLIAM W. PAUL  
*Central College, Iowa*

I would like to begin this survey of a few sample opinions of Paul Tillich's use of myth for getting a vision of history's meaning by making some appeal to my own doctoral study of *Paul Tillich's Interpretation of History*.<sup>1</sup> This will enable us to present a quick summary of Tillich's existential-theological approach to history and to give some evaluation which perhaps will be representative of a conservative Protestant reaction. For a sampling of a non-Protestant critique I plan to refer to several excellent chapters that appeared this year in *Religion and Culture: Essays in Honor of Paul Tillich* edited by Walter Leibrich.<sup>2</sup>

The interpretation of history can be treated as a science, a philosophy and an art, and a "good" interpretation of such a complex subject matter has got to be something of all three. The student who has recently gone over Augustine's *City of God* and has seen there the seriousness with which Biblical history is received certainly recognizes that he is in a different era when he takes up Tillich. The "science" side of historical interpretation has shifted and there is a resultant marked difference in the artistic vision of human history. Tillich accepts in general the late nineteenth century critical evaluation of the historical foundations of Christianity while strongly questioning the faith in human progress accepted by the older liberal theology. His interpretation is colored by his personal existential and theological perspective. As an existentialist he finds no ultimate meanings in the ambiguities of human life, but he does discern certain basic problems about the nature of man in historical existence. More important to Tillich than the special problems men actually face in life is the fact that all men are in some way plagued with finitude, anxiety, estrangement and guilt. With this question as to what is the real meaning of life that is allegedly uncovered by existential interpretation Tillich attempted to correlate his theological answer. He seeks to put meaning and significance into history by appealing to such key symbols as the Creation-fall, New Being or Christ as the Center of history, and the Kingdom of God as history's Aim. Let us examine these "keys" to history.

Tillich looks upon man as a free and responsible rational-social being who may use his finite freedom to contradict what he essentially ought to be. To interpret the split between man's good essence and his disrupted existence, Tillich appeals to his Creation-fall myth. Unlike Niebuhr, he takes this to be one myth, one configuration of religious symbols, pointing up the gap between Creator and creature. The myth points to a dialectical rather than a historical incident, to the awakening of men to a historical consciousness of their existential estrangement from essential goodness. When the Genesis story is subjected to a "half-way demythologization", such as Tillich calls it, it is not taken as referring to a historical fall of the first Adam and of the subsequent propensity of all men for the evil, but to man's continuous psychological experience of "falling" by trying to decide his destiny as an autonomous being. Thus it is claimed that although the Creation-fall may not be history, it can nevertheless be revelatory of man's feeling of dependence and finitude and of man's potentiality for creative goodness as well as destructiveness. But however dramatic such talk may be for picturing the ambiguities of human life, many critics of Tillich would agree that it sounds a lot different from the scriptural account of the first and

second Adams and it also sheds little light on the specific historical natures individual men appear to possess.

Tillich presents Christianity's answer to man's spiritual problem in terms of "new being" and "eternal life" as symbolized in the Center and Aim of the "history of salvation". He does what any Christian interpreter of history must do, he acknowledges a religious commitment to Christ as the *Kairos*, the Center in whom the ambiguities of history are overcome *in principle*. On the surface of things this seems to be the reason why he says that Christianity provides a "historical type" of interpretation of history *par excellence*. Strangely enough, Tillich proceeds to argue in his writings that the Christian view does not rest on (1) a historical Jesus, i.e., it does not rest on the tenuous results of historical research, or on (2) the Gospel story of Jesus of Nazareth, but (3) on the "Christ of Faith". If we should ask then how it is that Tillich can claim that (3) is the center of history, his answer is (a) that (3) does have some historical reference because (2) the gospel story—however demythologized it may become—does point to a historical person, and (b) that anyway the important fact is that the faithful find in the "Jesus which is the Christ" the *meaning-giving* center of history. The claim of such existentialist theology is that historical research (*historisch*) cannot touch foundation (b) with its story (*Geschichte*) of the spiritual significance of history. Like Kierkegaard, Tillich says that historical research which rests on merely probable knowledge cannot give to faith an objective foundation. He is just not interested in asking whether his "leap of faith" springs from meaning-giving events which are well confirmed historically. It is enough to be "grasped" by the truth of the Christ-symbol.

The symbol of history's outcome, the Kingdom of God, expresses for Tillich the "ultimate meaning of existence". Here Tillich's language might lead us to suppose that he is looking for some "supra-historical unification and purification" of the contests and decisions of history proper, but he tells us that he is not expecting the Kingdom as a stage of being but again simply as a *form of meaning* which is said to be beyond history and yet essentially related to history. His glimpse into the "eternal" requires "highly symbolic" figures. Perhaps like a Platonic essence this Idea of the Kingdom of God is to provide man with a standard for judging actual history and to serve as a motivating principle for man's action in his history. Tillich is certainly to be commended for his attempt to state a dynamic view of history in terms of such worthy values as love, justice, truth, and freedom. He is to be commended also for his idea of a "struggling" or "fighting" kingdom of God working through historical individuals and groups like the church to counter "demonic" forces in history. But is this all that the scriptures intend by "the reign of Christ"? Has not the eschatological imagery become so vague as to offer little spiritual comfort to the layman and little incentive for missionary endeavor? Certainly it is also questionable whether such a generalized aim or ideal can provide specific guides for a realistic and Christian social philosophy of history.

In summary we may say that Tillich's interpretation of history via religious symbols has little to do with historical investigation in the objective sense. He is concerned with getting man to participate subjectively in the story of New Being. Christ stands for the holy calling of the Christian community, the Cross points to the subjection of "old being", and Resurrection means New Being to the faithful. These are symbols which are supposed to point beyond themselves as signs and open up new dimensions of spiritual reality for man. The symbols which make up the three revelatory myths we have considered carry conviction for those "modern

minds" who can participate with Tillich in his sophisticated Christian faith. If the symbols and myths are "historical" it is mainly because, as we have said, they influence historical individuals and groups today in ways which may have historical significance. What Tillich needs most from the Conservative Protestant point of view is to realize that the true Biblical symbols *point from* historical situations as well as *pointing to* transforming existential truth.

\* \* \* \* \*

Next, I would like to call attention to several of the essays which have appeared in the volume *Religion and Culture* and which may in some sense be representative of a non-Protestant reaction to Paul Tillich's view of myth and history. First we must mention the excellent study of "Myth, Symbol and Analogy" by Gustave Weigel, S.J., Professor of Theology, Woodstock College, Woodstock, Md. Weigel wants to take his theology basically from the Bible and so he begins by asking about the kind of hermeneutics which one must employ to understand the Christian *kerygma* or message. He seems at first to agree with Niebuhr and Tillich that it is impossible to talk about God and eternity literally and this leads him to reject both the so-called "fundamentalist literalism" and the "moderate historicist position of Aquinas" (121). At the other extreme is Bultmann's attempt to demythologize religious literature which, for Weigel, represents a hermeneutical loss of nerve. It is far better, he says, to follow Niebuhr and Tillich at this point and to recognize that much that Bultmann would call myth can be translated for the modern mind into genuinely revelatory religious symbols. It should be pointed out, however, that Weigel's definition of myth or *mythos* as the image-evoking power of words is considerably different from Tillich's concept of a myth as a cluster of symbols. Indeed, Weigel makes it plain that the real difficulty "vexing the existentialist theologians" is not the image-evoking or pointing power of religious symbols, but "the *logos* of the Bible," the actual intellectual content of the religious vocabulary (123). They make much of the "permanently valid myths" such as creation, fall, resurrection, and the kingdom of God for expressing their "ultimate concern", but, says the writer, "the historical concreteness of the Biblical accounts, patent to any reader, is swallowed up into a trans-historical awareness of existence. The symbolists make much of the meaning of history, but as theologians they ignore on principle any historiographic validity of the Bible" (25). Weigel himself seems to adopt a historical-literary and contextual method of exegesis. He does not propose that the historical assertions of scripture be tested by the canons of Bernheim but rather that they be understood in the "modes and styles of the past and according to the theological purposes of the authors" (130). The net result of Weigel's up-dated Thomistic hermeneutics is that he wants to say, for example, not only that resurrection means that the man of faith rises above death, but that the doctrine implies as well a genuine historical claim.

Another contributor to the essays in honor of Paul Tillich is the Professor of Eastern Orthodox Church History at Harvard Divinity School, George Florovsky. Writing on "The Predicament of the Christian Historian," Florovsky tries to give the existentialist his due. He creates unnecessary problems for himself by accepting the position of Collingwood and Tillich that, since the historian must "identify" himself with the past which he studies, "historical knowledge is, and must be, an existential knowledge" (150). Fortunately, Florovsky goes on to insist that there can be no writing of history without a "retrospective perspective", an inquiry "at a distance" into "what actually happened" (151). It is true, of course, that a historical perspec-

tive concerning the coming of the Israelites out of Egypt, or the death and resurrection of Christ, or the spread of the Christian church, could be treated by a historian "purely objectively" and without personal concern. If the historian is also a Christian then he would not only seek out the facts and interpretation of these events, but he would also be able to participate in their spiritual meaning existentially. He would, as Florovsky says, see in the "history of salvation" the "beginning", "center" and "end" of history. Florovsky puts Tillich's claim concerning the centrality of Christianity for history clearly and directly when he says that the non-Christian historian *must* pay attention to the Christian world-view if for no other reason than because it provided a truly "historical type of interpretation of history" (as Tillich calls it) which alone was able to challenge the prevailing cyclical and fatalistic views of history. It alone was able to make "history of man" with all of its plurality and complexity a genuine possibility (162). It must be added that if a supposedly neutral perspective on history is to be replaced by a genuinely Christian view, that view must center in the Lordship of the *historical* God-man. This fact is recognized by Florovsky and is stressed by Weigel.

From what has been emphasized thus far I believe we can see that Paul Tillich has been concerned to set forth a view of human history which takes history as (a) the sphere in which human freedom can be exercised in ways which are important for the life of human groups and especially for the Christian church, and and (b) the medium of divine revelation when seen as centering in the appearance of Jesus as the Christ who reveals the new form of life and the ultimate meaning of all historical life. As we have seen, the literary expression of (b) may, as far as Tillich is concerned, be couched in the form of a myth in order that other-worldly matters or ultimate truths might be expressed in the symbols of human language. Tillich would be willing to say that revelatory truth need not be confined to the main Jewish-Christian sources. This fact, plus the general philosophical language which Tillich uses in setting forth his theology, has given him a quite universal hearing among those interested in philosophy of religion. The book *Religion and Culture* contains an insightful example of this in the essay by Yoshinori Takeuchi, "Buddhism and Existentialism: The Dialogue Between Oriental and Occidental Thought". Takeuchi is a Buddhist and is professor of philosophy at the University of Kyoto in Japan. His dialogue deals chiefly with the concepts of being, non-being and being-itself as developed by Tillich and the Japanese Buddhists. Both put a kind of dialectical conception of "nothingness" within their idea of God as the Ground of all being. As Takeuchi puts it, "God is at once Being-itself and Absolute nothingness. As Being-itself infinitely transcends every being, so Absolute Nothingness transcends [and includes] mere non-being" (302). If nothing else, this way of talking reveals a marked affinity between the language of Schelling and Tillich, and that of some forms of Eastern thought. In Takeuchi's essay the affinity carries over to his own liberalizing program for Buddhism. The doctrine of "eternal return" or rebirth, for example, Takeuchi understands mythologically rather than in its popular and more fatalistic sense. It is most significant for our study to note the parallel understanding of the role of myths and symbols in the two theologies. As the Japanese philosopher puts it, myth is a "springboard: our religious existence first takes a firm stand on this, in the assurance that, leaping from it, we may plunge into the bliss of salvation or emancipation" (308). This is the way to "save" the symbolic meaning of the myths in Buddhism, he argues, rather than trying to de-mythologize the literature as some of the contemporary Japanese scholars are doing. Thus, whether it be the *karman* concept of sin and rebirth or the eschatology of Jesus, in both cases,

says Takeuchi, we must get behind the "mythical elements which formed the cradles in which the world religions grew up" to the "discernible religious intuitions" which are "awakened by the very finitude of our being which is always threatened by non-being" (309). Perhaps Takeuchi puts the logical outcome of Tillich's position very well when he himself envisions the possibility of the awakening of man to "new self or New Being" as the streams of religion flow out through these "mythological wadies". If this pushing of Tillich's thesis is justified, then it becomes possible to have revelatory "saving history" (*Heilsgeschichte*) without the "*Christ of faith*" as well as without the historical Lord Jesus Christ.

## NOTES

1. Columbia University doctoral dissertation, University Microfilm Service, 1959. Documentation for what follows will be found in Chapter IV.
2. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959.