

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php

Some Aspects of Tillich's Systematic Theology

J. HEYWOOD THOMAS

IT HAS BEEN SAID that what Whitehead was to American philosophy Tillich has become to American theology. Great claims have been made for him both as a philosopher and as a theologian, and some extravagant things have been said. There can be no doubt that Tillich is indeed one of the most interesting figures on the theological scene; but it is unusually difficult in his case to say what makes him so significant. Here is a new sort of apologetic and enthusiastic translation of Christian doctrines which combines an evangelical fervour with an elaborate and abstract schematization. Consequently, one of the dangerous elements in his work has been its tendency to become the slogan of a theological group or school. It seems to me that he is too much admired and too little understood. If he is to be understood then two kinds of criticism must be undertaken—the one historical and the other systematic. We must first look at the sources of his thought and particularly of his vocabulary, and then we shall be able to understand what he is saying. Much of the difficulty which people in Britain experience in reading Tillich's work is due to the strangeness of his vocabulary; for during the last twenty years our theological idiom has been little influenced by existentialist philosophy and is equally free of idealist influence. This translation or exposition, then, is the first kind of criticism that needs to be undertaken. The second kind is rather different; for once we have managed to get at what Tillich is saying the task of evaluation becomes the more pressing. And in order to evaluate we must highlight the confusions in his thinking and extract from it what is valuable and helpful.

Tillich seeks to write theology for an age which has no faith in the idealistic philosophy which lay at the roots of liberal theology. He tells us that as he was born in 1886 he has always felt that he belonged to the nineteenth century. But he has grown up in the twentieth century and has shared the bitter disappointments and agonies of all who have witnessed the two world wars. He says of himself: "I am one of those in my generation who, in spite of the radicalism with which they have criticized the nineteenth century, often feel a longing for its stability, its liberalism, its unbroken cultural traditions." This confession is a valuable key to Tillich's thought, revealing as it does the ambiguity which is so characteristic of his way of thinking. If we use this as our key, we shall be led to look for three things as decisive influences: a conception of thought as capable of producing some abiding result (the desire for stability), an ideal of some sort of synthesis between humanism

and Kerygma (the nostalgia for liberalism), and the very different radical dissatisfaction with the nineteenth-century outlook (the radical criticism).

The first influence explains why Tillich should be anxious to write a system at all, which must surely be one of the intriguing things about his work for an English reader. We do not possess many systems of theology in this country—a fact which may reflect the strong heritage of empiricism in our outlook. The British theologian prefers to deal with separate questions. Is it because he believes that a system of theology is doomed from the outset to failure? Be that as it may, Tillich's thought reflects a very different intellectual climate, and this we must understand. It is strangely enough an intellectual climate which characterizes both Germany and America. Tillich's thought has been hailed in the United States as the Protestant alternative to Neo-Thomism, because of the "unity and completeness" of its "vision of the real." To think in these terms is to imagine both Philosophy and Theology as in some strange way engaged in describing what is the case. Tillich declares that the essence of philosophy is ontology—"that cognitive approach to reality in which reality as such is the object." Philosophy, he says, asks for truth itself; it seeks to know reality as a whole.

It seems to me that there can be no doubt that what we have here is the core of what is called absolute idealism. To this someone may reply: "What difference does it make to call it idealism? You have not proved it wrong by doing that." True enough, but then in philosophy one does not *prove* anything; as has been well said, a philosophy dies of old age, not through disproof. We may not quarrel with the statement that philosophy and theology are engaged in the same kind of enterprise. But are we content when we are told that in so far as our philosophizing is concerned with values, we are theologians, and that the Christian message is the answer to these questions? We may not be, but Tillich certainly is content. This is the second decisive influence—the nostalgia for liberalism which led Tillich to take up a stand of classical German philosophy, the quest of a synthesis. This quest has been the driving force in all his theological work, and it is what makes his *Systematic Theology* so unusual in this post-liberal era in Theology.

It might appear that the third influence is quite different from the first two, but in fact its presence simply shows how much nearer to the nineteenth century Tillich is than we may be led at first to imagine. Even before entering university Tillich had studied philosophy. "When I entered the University," he says, "I had a good knowledge of the history of philosophy, and a basic acquaintance with Kant and Fichte. Schleiermacher, Hegel and Schelling followed." The last-named was the subject of both his doctoral dissertation and his thesis for the Licentiate of Theology. Tillich, therefore, sees the decisive break with the nineteenth century, as typified by Hegel, in Schelling's work of his second period—the so-called "Positive Philosophy." This, according to Tillich, is the beginning of the movement we know as Existentialism. Once again, I am not at the moment concerned

to say whether this is right or wrong, but only to show that even in his criticism of the nineteenth century he is not standing exactly where most people now stand. What was the influence on Tillich, then, of the twentieth-century form of this philosophical movement? Tillich himself says of it that it took years before he became fully aware of its impact on his own thinking. "I resisted, I tried to learn, I accepted the new way of thinking more than the answers it gave."

So far we have talked only of Tillich's place in the history of theology—a necessary preliminary if we hope to find out what his language means. Let us now turn to what Tillich actually says. Tillich's work is characterized by two quite opposite tendencies: a love of rigid argumentation on the one hand and on the other an almost haphazard combination of terms. A typical example of this is the contention at the beginning of the second volume that the consistency of the two volumes of his *Systematic Theology* lies in the fact that the systematic structure of the content is unchanged, and not in any deductive character of the system. In Volume I he had, however, gone to great lengths to insist on the rational character of systematic theology, meaning by "rationality" three things: the careful definition of terms, the observance of rules of logic, and the *systematic* character of theology. Therefore, when we find him protesting in Volume II that the system is not deductive, it seems that Tillich is trying to get the best of two worlds. He has insisted that theology must be systematic, and now he guards himself against the charge of inconsistency within his system by a favourite device of his—legislative definition. By "system" he says he does not mean a deductive system, but one whose principle is vital. Now this I find most odd, not only because it is hard to see what he means, but also because "deductive" is the very word that best describes Tillich's whole method. He talks of the necessity of semantics, and the idea which lies behind what seems a very welcome plea is that every word in the language has a correct meaning. And with definition goes all the other equipment of logic. Tillich himself says: "Theology is as dependent on formal logic as any other science." Having said this, he nevertheless fights shy of the term "deductive," saying that a deductive system of Christian truth would have been a contradiction in terms. System here, he maintains, is "a totality made up of consistent but not deduced assertions." Yet when he talks about his method of correlation he maintains that theology answers the questions which are asked by an analysis of the human situation such as is provided by philosophy amongst other things. Here at least he uses a deductive method in order to describe the nature of theology. And we shall see how so much of his theology follows from his definitions that the consistency of these statements is quite clearly that of a deduction. Now I may seem to be doing nothing more than elaborating on a contradiction in Tillich's work—a trivial sort of evaluation of any man's work. But my purpose is the more serious one of showing that this kind of thing is inherent in the way Tillich talks, the language he uses, so that if we are going to profit by his

work we must first recognize that the medium he chooses for his theological creation is an obstacle and not a help. I am perfectly sure that Tillich has a great deal to say which will be helpful to us in the present rather fluid state of philosophical theology. But I cannot emphasize too strongly the necessity of removing the confusions which his old-fashioned language engenders.

One such confusion is to be seen in his discussion of religious language. After raising our hopes by insisting that everything we say about God is symbolic, he mars this clear emphasis by a fruitless discussion of the necessity of at least this one non-symbolic assertion about God: that God is Being-itself. I fail to see that this is an assertion about God. What Tillich says can be understood if we understand what we mean by the word "symbol." It is, however, clear that Tillich wants to make this a non-symbolic assertion about God because he understands his definition of God as Being-itself to be non-symbolic as well. Presumably he feels justified in formulating this definition since he has demonstrated both the necessity and the possibility of a non-symbolic anchor. Here again we meet this paradoxical character of Tillich's thought that I have mentioned already—namely, the way in which its fruitfulness is covered over with a disconcertingly antiquated and forbidding terminology. The supposed necessity of a non-symbolic anchor turns out to be not only a trivial matter but also to involve a confusion which would not have been possible had he used the insights of modern logic.

Even so it is worth reflecting on this concept because what it leads on to is the whole problem of the verification of theological assertions—a vital issue, of course, in contemporary debates between philosophers and theologians. For if we have non-symbolic anchors to theological statements which are themselves symbolic, it follows that the theological statements are meaningful only because of these other statements. Therefore, the ultimate verification of the theological statement is an empirical verification. The question which this concept raises, then, is whether theological statements are in fact verified in this way. It seems clear to me that the philosophical analysis of theological statements gives a negative answer. What is more important perhaps, I do not think Tillich himself would want to say that this is the appropriate verification. Yet this kind of verification is what he very often undertakes. Thus, when he discusses the concept of original sin, he pleads for a reinterpretation of this doctrine and a replacement of the very term by a "description of the interpretation of the moral and the tragic elements in the human situation," and he adds that the empirical basis for such a description has become quite extensive in our period. Now this description is presumably to be understood as the non-symbolic anchor to the symbolic doctrinal statements. The question is whether we have not destroyed the symbolical significance of the term "original sin." Is the doctrine of original sin a matter of empirical description? Tillich himself does not always talk as if it were, and he shows a very fine sense of what may be called the non-descriptive character of the concept of

sin. He insists rightly that sin is an essentially religious concept. In that case one would expect him to say that the doctrine of original sin is an essentially symbolical statement. When he interprets the Genesis myth, Tillich certainly talks in a non-empirical way about the individual act of sin as an act of freedom imbedded in the universal destiny of existence. This kind of metaphorical description of the human situation is surely the borderline of religion and metaphysics. And indeed it seems at times that Tillich is in danger of making his religious category a purely metaphysical one. The distinctive character of the Christian conception of sin is that it is regarded as "both as inevitable and volitional" (to quote Bishop Aulén). What perplexes us about Tillich's discussion of sin is that he seems to understand this inevitability of sin in terms of a connection between sin and finitude. "The disruption of the essential unity with God is the innermost character of sin." Sin is a universal fact before it becomes an individual act, or more precisely, sin as an individual act actualizes the fact of estrangement. All this could be a very healthy protest against the excessive moralism which has threatened to distort the essentially Protestant doctrine of sin—which, as Tillich again rightly says, views sin qualitatively and not quantitatively. But when he introduces his mysterious concept of a structure of destruction we begin to feel that matters are not quite so satisfactory. The original fact, he says, is the transition from essence to existence, and the universality of the transition makes its fateful necessity. Niebuhr's famous remark that sin is inevitable but not necessary comes to mind. So also does Luther's remark that necessity belongs to physics and not to theology and that, if this concept is to be used in theology, it must be bathed and washed. What Luther had in mind was the preservation of the volitional character of sin as an act of the individual, despite the fact that it might be described as inevitable in relation to the natural man. Tillich does not, it is true, want to affirm that sin and finitude are synonymous; but it is also true that he does not succeed in preserving the distinction intact. For it seems to me that he makes it necessary for man, if he is to become man, to become sinner also, since he says that individuality involves separation from the ground of being, and sin is defined as the rupture of the original essential unity of Creator and creature. And once more this confusion is due to the ambiguity of the terms he employs—such as estrangement, or the loss of unity, which can be interpreted both conceptually and dramatically. The difficulty one meets here, as elsewhere in Tillich, is that he does not distinguish between his interpretative concept and the myth he seeks to interpret. Thus when he says that the meaning of the myth is that the very constitution of existence implies the transition from essence to existence he is talking both theory and myth. And if he can talk of implication it is not surprising that he talks also of necessity. But whatever the doctrine of original sin means, the myth of the Fall clearly points to the fact that we need not have sinned. Then, in our endeavour to understand the proneness to wander which we own in our confession, we may bid the muse sing of man's first disobedience.

This is to insist that it will not do to regard sin as a mere accident. Tillich's intellectualization of the myth seems to me to endanger the myth's power. For the myth does not absolve us; but Tillich's peculiar myth might well become a matter of saying: "Sin is necessarily bound up with finitude. And if it is implied by the order in which we find ourselves it is no longer our responsibility." Tillich's doctrine of sin is a curious mixture of Neo-Platonism and Existentialism.

Another instance of the essential ambiguity of Tillich's thought is his discussion of the relation between historical criticism and the doctrine of Jesus as the Christ. Jesus as the Christ, says Tillich, is at the same time an historical fact and a subject of believing interpretation. This emphasis on the double character of the talk about Jesus, or Christological statements, is a very welcome and necessary emphasis. But it seems to me that no sooner have we been treated to the clarification of Christology than we are confused even more by Tillich's interpretation of this complex of two languages. For what he says is that in the Christian doctrine of the Christ the historical Jesus is the Jesus interpreted as the Christ. And though he still remarks that "Christian theology must insist on the actual fact to which the name of Jesus of Nazareth applies," he immediately says that without the believing reception of Jesus as the Christ, the Christ would not have been the Christ. This would seem to make nonsense of the earlier statement that Jesus as the Christ is an historical fact. It will not do to say that, because Jesus is the subject of a believing interpretation, Tillich is right in saying that without this he is not the Christ. For Christian doctrine must surely claim that it is true to say that Jesus is the Christ. Tillich himself feels some difficulty with this position, and he raises the question whether the validity of the message is therefore dependent on the continuity of the historical tradition in which Jesus appears as the centre. The New Testament, he tells us, is aware of this problem and maintains that up to the end of the world Jesus the Christ will be with those who believe in him and that before the end he will establish his reign. But what if mankind destroyed itself tomorrow? Tillich's answer is that Jesus as the Christ determines the beginning and the end of the historical development of which he is the centre. For us within this historical continuum he is the Christ. "This existential limitation does not qualitatively limit his significance, but it leaves open other ways of divine self-manifestation before and after our historical continuum." This assertion is very unsatisfactory, and it seems to me that Tillich is here again exploiting the ambiguity of his language, suggesting the factual nature of his statements by the use of the word historical, but giving history an esoteric connotation in order to make it identical with the life of the community of faith. And to say that this "existential limitation," as he calls it, leaves the significance unimpaired is merely dogmatism. For when we have given certain expressions a particular meaning, it is of no use to say that our finite minds cannot understand why their implications contradict an essential part of their meaning.

Let us now go back to the question of the historical fact. Tillich points out that the research for the so-called "historical Jesus," the attempt to discover the empirical data concerning him, has been a failure. Furthermore he claims, such an enterprise has no direct relevancy for the doctrine of Christ. But he also recognizes that the phrase "historical Jesus" can be used to mean "that the event 'Jesus as the Christ' has a factual element." And if the factual element in the Christian event were denied, he says, the foundation of Christianity would be denied. This is a very difficult and a crucial problem, and it is a pity that Tillich does not say more about it. For however many meanings of the term "historical Jesus" he may distinguish, it is this question which really puzzles us when we talk of Jesus as the historical Christ. It is the puzzle of how the truth of the statement "Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ" both does and does not depend on the truth of certain historical statements which could be made by an historian.

Clearly Tillich has made a courageous attempt at clearing up some of the confusions that have abounded in discussions of the historical Jesus; but I do not think that he completely avoids these confusions, and it therefore becomes all the more necessary to examine rather carefully what he has to say. The fundamental point he makes about the actual person Jesus of Nazareth is that he was such a person as to warrant the claim of the New Testament that he was the Christ. In other words, there would be a correspondence between the portrait and the imaginary photograph. Tillich in fact goes further than this original position, and maintains that there must be such a correspondence. The doctrine that Jesus is the Christ assumes that there could be nothing discovered about the historical or actual Jesus which would contradict the New Testament portrait of him. This is not at all as simple as it might seem. It is very difficult to understand how Tillich can make the first statement, which is purely hypothetical. How can we say that there would be a correspondence when we have no idea what the photograph would be like? Tillich might perhaps say that we do have such an idea because the portrait is a portrait of the same subject as the photograph. But we have here defined "portrait" so as to make the statement a tautology: X is Y because by X we mean Y. The second statement is therefore better because it really cannot be understood as anything but a metaphysical statement. Jesus must have been such as to warrant the claim that he was the Christ. Now we can imagine a portrait which seems at all points to correspond with a photograph. But the truth of this portrait depends on there being no contradictory evidence. When such evidence is forthcoming, we are forced to abandon the portrait. Now this is always true of an historical situation: it can be different. How then does Tillich say that there *must* be a correspondence? I think his confusion here brings out the non-historical or metaphysical character of Christological assertions. What is unfortunate is that he imagines that this statement is homogeneous with the historical statement he also makes concerning Jesus. Are we then to say that historical criticism cannot shake the conviction that Jesus is the

Christ? I find it impossible to answer this question with a straightforward "Yes" or "No." Tillich is surely right when he says that the biblical assertion that Jesus is the Christ is not regarded as an assertion made on the evidence which historical criticism yields. As Kierkegaard put it, "from history one can learn nothing about Christ." However, though it is true that it is not on this evidence that the assertion is made, it does not follow that certain facts need not be known to be true in order to support the claim that Jesus is the Christ. The way we come to know something is not necessarily the way our knowledge is justified. 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. This is part of the Christian claim. But then what of the assertion as a whole? It is a combination of historical and non-historical assertions; and if the historical statement is denied the character of the Christian assertion will at least be changed. Even so, we can say with Tillich that it has not thereby been falsified because it is not a statement of fact. This is the point which Tillich tries to make when he talks in a very misleading way about history as possessing only a high degree of probability.

A few words may be added on Tillich's treatment of the Atonement. There are two sides to the process of atonement: "that in the manifestation of the New Being which has an atoning effect and that which happens to man under the atoning effect." Tillich admits that the second element makes the process of atonement partly dependent on man's possibilities of reaction and so introduces "a moment of indefiniteness" into the doctrine. It is for this reason, he feels, that there has been no dogmatic formulation of this doctrine. He contents himself with laying down six principles which should determine the further development of the doctrine of atonement. Through participation in the New Being men participate in the manifestation of the atoning act of God. This understanding yields the threefold division of salvation: participation, acceptance, transformation—or, in classical terminology: Regeneration, Justification, Sanctification. It seems to me that this analysis is very unsatisfactory, because once more we have the confusion of empirical and non-empirical language. How is the word "Atonement" in fact used in Christian doctrine? Is it used at all to describe an empirical state of affairs? Tillich would seem to suggest that it is, because he insists that there is a subjective as well as an objective side to atonement. He goes so far as to say that the process of atonement is partly dependent on man's possibilities of reaction. This assertion immediately raises for the theologian the question of the once-for-allness of the Cross. It is also worth noting that Tillich refers to the *process* rather than the *act* of atonement. This might not be important because both words are here used metaphorically or symbolically in any case. But I very much doubt that Tillich is using the word only in a symbolical way. To my mind his talk about process and the subjective element suggests that he regards the doctrine of atonement

as in some sense a psychological description. And if it is a psychological description then it cannot be a matter of talking about God and his work. Similarly, it is not correct to read the doctrines of atonement and salvation as though they belonged to ethical language. Tillich's understanding of the objective and subjective elements of atonement seems to me to make it to much like a brain operation which radically changes a person's character. Here, too, there are the objective and subjective elements, but there is not that kind of paradox which is essential to atonement doctrine—*simul justus et peccator*.

There will probably be as many differing views of Tillich's contribution as there are readers of his work, but all will agree that he is one of the most enlightening theologians of our time. For some he will present a spiritual home in the form of a Protestant "Summa." I hope that this does not happen generally; for I feel that the way of drastic criticism which I have followed is the real way of appreciating the greatness of this outstanding apologist.