

## Paul Johannes Tillich (1886-1965)

### Introduction

“Perhaps no theologian in this century has created more controversy in regard to his ideas and his life.... Some say that he is the greatest theologian of the twentieth century, and others say that he is a great deceiver or the twentieth century’s most dangerous theologian” (Newport, p207)

The importance of connecting Tillich’s context, life and thought

“Paul Tillich is an involved, existential and emphatically philosophical theologian. His thought tends to be an immediate expression of his own complex personal pilgrimage. Tillich identified with the problems of his generation in an extremely personal way. He sought to work out the problems of his generation as his destiny. There is a unity in Tillich’s thought and his life and destiny” (Newport, p21)

Theology to be experienced - scholarly and popular work – academic context but church too – personal dimension – autobiographical writings

Regarded himself as a theologian rather than a philosopher: “I was and am a theologian, because the existential question of our ultimate concern and the existential answer of the Christian message are and always have been predominant in my spiritual life” (*Theology of Paul Tillich*, p10)

### Life and Influences

(see Pauck for detailed chronology of Tillich’s life)

Born 20<sup>th</sup> August 1886 in Starzeddel in Brandenburg, Prussia

Son of a conservative Lutheran pastor

Moved to Berlin at the age of 14

Tillich’s mother died when he was 17

Studied theology at Berlin (1904), Tubigen, Halle, Breslau

PhD on the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Romantic philosopher, Fredrich Schelling

Became Evangelical Lutheran pastor in Brandenburg (1912)

Served as a chaplain in WWI – a traumatic experience – religious socialism – art

By the time he left the army in 1918, “the traditional monarchist had become a religious socialist, the Christian believer a cultured pessimist, the repressed puritanical boy a ‘wild man’. These years represented *the* turning point in Paul Tillich’s life” (Wilhelm and Marion Pauck)

Tillich thought that the change in himself reflected a change in Western civilization

1<sup>st</sup> public lecture: “On the idea of a Theology of Culture”

Taught at Berlin (1919)

Professor at Marburg (1924-25), Dresden (1925-28), Leipzig (1928-29) and Philosophy at Frankfurt (1929-33)

Meets with 20<sup>th</sup> Century existentialism at Marburg

Commented: “I resisted, I tried to learn, I accepted the new way of thinking more than the answer it gave” (*TofPT* p12) – “Existentialism the good luck of Christianity”

Sympathetic to new dialectical theology and influenced by Barth

“Like Barth, he insists on Kierkegaard’s ‘infinite qualitative difference’ between the temporal and the eternal, on the necessity of revelation and the inevitability of paradox when human language tries to express the divine revelation. However, Tillich was too liberal-minded to follow Barth entirely, and increasingly his work became sharply distinguished from ‘dialectical theology’”

(Thomas p4)

Indebted to the Romantic movement e.g. to Schleiermacher; phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976); drew heavily on the psychology of Jung, esp. in his work on symbols

First non-Jew to be dismissed by Hitler, for socialism (1933)

Thanks to Reinhold Niebuhr, became Professor of Philosophical Theology at Union Theological Seminary, NY until his retirement in 1955

First volume of *Systematic Theology* brings him intellectual super-star status

Taught at Harvard (1955-62) and Chicago (1962-65) Divinity Schools

Naturalised as US citizen in 1940

Troubled marriage

Felt personal guilt and feared for his salvation

(Legacy & Influence? c.f. John A T Robinson, *Honest to God* (1963), Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God* (1980))

## **Major Works**

*On the Boundary: An Autobiographical Sketch* (1936)

*The Protestant Era* (1947)

*The Shaking of the Foundations* (1948) – set of sermons - became a best-seller

*Systematic Theology* ( 3 vols, 1951, 1957, 1963)

*The Courage to Be: sermons* (1953)

*Love, Power and Justice* (1954)

*The New Being* (1955)

*Theology of Culture* (1959)

*Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions* (1963)

*The Eternal Now* (1963)

*The Socialist Situation* (ET 1977)

(*The Essential Tillich: An Anthology of the Writings of Paul Tillich*, ed. F. Forrester Church)

(*Paul Tillich: Theologian of the Boundaries*, Mark Kline Taylor)

(see Taylor or Newport for further Bibliography)

## **Sources**

Alexander J. McKelway, *The Systematic Theology of Paul Tillich* (Littleworth Press, London, 1964)

John P. Newport, *Paul Tillich*, (Word, 1984)

Wilhelm & Marion Pauck, *Paul Tillich: His Life & Thought* (

J. Heywood Thomas, *Paul Tillich* (John Knox Press, Richmond, 1966)

## **Thought**

### **Basic aim**

Christian apologetics for contemporary generation – apostle to the intellectuals

“Paul Tillich’s principal good was to make Christianity understandable and persuasive to religiously sceptical people, modern in culture and secular in sensibility. He came to be extraordinarily effective in that role” (David H. Kelsey, in Ford *Modern Theology* p134)

“If any simple answer is then to be given to our question, What makes Tillich important? It is that he was forced to ask certain basic questions about theology which we need to ask and he has shown the kind of courage we need to answer them” (Thomas p42)

## **Method of Correlation**

“In using the method of correlation, systematic theology proceeds in the following way: it makes an analysis of the human situation out of which existential questions arise, and it demonstrates that the symbols used in the Christian message are the answers to these questions” (*Systematic Theology I*, p70)

### Systematic Theology

Pt 1 Reason and Revelation

Q: How can we know with certainty any humanly important truth?

A: Logos

Pt 2 Being and God

Q: How can we understand the destructive forces that threaten to disintegrate our lives?

A: God as Creator

Pt 3 Concrete Human Existence and Christ

Q: How can we heal alienation from self and neighbour?

A: Jesus as Christ

Pt 4 Life in its ambiguities and the Spirit

Q: How can our lives be authentic?

A: Spirit

Pt 5 The meaning of history and the kingdom of God

Q: Has history and meaning?

A: Kingdom of God

in being allowed to set the agenda, does existentialism corrupt the substance of Christianity? Should the theologian not start with the Word of God?

## **De-literalising the symbols**

“let us therefore forget these concepts, as concepts, and try to find their genuine meaning within our own experience”

Anthony Thistleton (*NDT* p688): “Tillich provides no adequate criterion to test [symbols’] truth”

## **The Protestant Principle**

is Tillich’s theology excessively wedded to the spirit of his age?

## **God as Being / Being Itself / The Ground of Our Being**

“The God above the God of theism is present, although hidden, in every divine-human encounter”

Christian? sub-personal? Crypto-Atheist?

## **The Gospel According to Tillich?**

“the basic Christian assertion (is) that Essential God-Manhood has appeared within existence and subjected itself to the conditions of existence without being conquered by them. If there was no personal life in which existential estrangement had been overcome, the New Being would have remained a quest and an expectation and would not be a reality in time and space” (*ST* p98)

“Tillich’s whole theological or onto-theological system derives its structure and form from his understanding that ultimate reality is involved in a movement of unactualized **essence** into **existence** and then in a return to fulfilled **essentialization**” (Newport, p66)

sin as **estrangement**

excessively ontological rather than ethical account of sin? what if I don’t feel estranged?

the work of Christ – inaugurating **New Being** – essential being under the condition of existence conquering the gap between essence and existence by the ultimate sacrifice

how much does the historicity of the incarnation matter? docetist? adoptionist?

participation in salvation - faith – the depths and totality of self being grasped by our **ultimate concern**

idolatry – if the penultimate becomes ultimate it is rendered demonic

“Every concern is tyrannical and wants our whole heart and our whole mind and our whole strength. Every concern tries to become our ultimate concern, our god.” (*Our Ultimate Concern*)

Polemic against religion: “Religion can be a human concern on the same level as others, creating the same anxiety as the others.... If religion is the special concern of special people and not the ultimate concern of everyone, it is nonsense or blasphemy.”

salvation (**acuity**) - participation in the new being (regeneration)  
acceptance of the new being (justification)  
transformation by the new being (sanctification)