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EXISTENCE AND REVELATION IN THE THEOLOGY OF PAUL TILLICH

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In this his first article for Faith & Reason, George Kendall offers an insightful critique of the thought of Paul Tillich. He reveals how Tillich's erroneous ontological view ends up distorting the Christian vision of revelation.



PAUL TILLICH'S THEOLOGY OF REVELATION AND, BY EXTENSION, OF SALVATION, has as its center his principle of correlation. This principle affirms that God's revelation to His creatures must, in its form, be correlated to the conditions under which creatures have their being, that is, the conditions of existence. This is formulated in the familiar statement that existence is the question to which revelation is the answer.¹ The structure of existence thus sets the formal conditions which revelation must meet in order to answer meaningfully the questions posed by existence. The popularity of this approach is accounted for, at least in part, by the fact that the human interpretation of existence enters, at least in part, into the structure of existence, and thus, if we accept the principle of correlation, we are in a position to argue that revelation must correlate itself to the particular interpretation of existence (world-view or *Weltanschauung*) to which a particular culture or group is committed.² This means, practically speaking, that it is possible for the various modern ideologies which (in the present view) are fundamentally anti-Christian, to require that God's revelation conform itself to their demands. This approach provides a foundation for a project of human self-salvation or self-deification, an issue central to this essay.

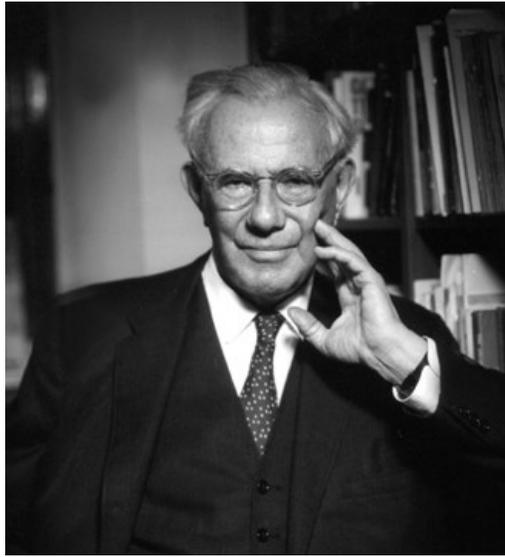
As a practical matter, then, Tillich's principle of correlation is a principle requiring a correspondence between God's revelation and Tillich's own ontology or theory of being. There are three ways in which this approach may, in the present view, be criticized from an orthodox Christian perspective:

1) We may question the whole notion of any relation between revelation and ontology. This type of critique may be valid insofar as it refers to the notion of a pre-existing ontology to which the symbolic expression of revelation must somehow conform itself; but is, in the present view, incorrect if it implies that there is no such thing as an ontology related to revelation when it seems clear that, in fact, the situation of revelation generates an ontology by placing man in a new relation both to God and to the creation and thus forcing him to see the structure of being in a new way. In this situation, however, revelation clearly comes first, then ontology.

2) We might criticize his ontology on its own level without taking revelation into account. This would be legitimate only on the hypothesis that ontology as such is an autonomous enterprise not dependent for its substance or validity on what revelation tells us about the structure of being. This understanding is, as already noted, precluded by the present approach.

3) Finally, one can criticize his ontology precisely in its relation to revelation, by attempting to show that it is

not only not derived from revelation but is in actual opposition to revelation. If we take this approach, the issue must be: What is the relation of Tillich's ontology to revelation? Furthermore, what kind of ontology is appropriate to someone who responds to revelation without attempting to impose upon it any pre-revelation ontological conditions, but who, in the light of revelation, sees the creation in a new way and formulates an ontology grounded in this seeing?



Paul Tillich

Clearly, such an ontology must affirm the goodness of the creation, and thus it will involve a positive evaluation of the finite as such, of existence, of actuality. It will see the creature as having its own act of existence, its own power of being, and hence will not try to reduce creatures to some kind of negative potential universality but will affirm them in their unique actuality and particularity, looking for universality in the community of beings in Christ.³ It seems more than evident that Tillich's is not such an ontology but is in fact a radically dualistic ontology which sees finitude and actuality and hence creatureliness as principles of evil, which denies the positive reality of created being as such. It is thus an anti-revelation ontology and is not related to revelation in the only way in which an ontology can be related to revelation. When it tries to impose its conditions on revelation, it generates a radically distorted picture of revelation. The nature of Tillich's anti-revelation ontology and the ways in which it distorts the understanding of revelation will be the subjects of the sections which follow.

I

Tillich's dualistic ontology is expressed in terms of several pairs of opposed concepts central to his thought, among which the following are notable: 1) the opposition of existence and essence; 2) the opposition of particularity and universality; 3) the opposition of potentiality and actuality. Tillich's attitude toward these oppositions emerges, with particular clarity, in the context of his understanding of the Fall, and thus the consideration of these dualities will be intertwined with the consideration of Tillich's approach to this theological issue.

If there is a cornerstone to Tillich's ontology, it is undoubtedly his distinction of essential and existential being,⁴ a distinction which merges into that between actuality and potentiality.⁵ Tillich begins by tracing the etymology of the word "existence," "to stand out." He sees existence as standing out from relative non-being (the *me on*)⁶ and thus, in effect, standing out from potentiality.⁷ The opposition thus becomes one of actuality and potentiality and existence comes to be understood as involving a fall from the non-existence potentiality

of essential being into the "outstanding" actuality of existence. Thus existence emerges from a split in being, a split into potentiality and actuality. Clearly, Tillich's central concept is that of a primary unity or identity of being as pure potentiality, as unactualized power of being, a unity broken when the power is actualized as the multiplicity of particular existents which we know as the world. This view of things informs his whole treatment of the doctrine of the Fall.⁸ For him, the biblical narrative in which man is given a command has the significance, not that man is given a choice to obey or disobey, but rather of pointing to an ontological state in which man, as a pure potentiality, in union with being, is tempted to make the transition from potentiality to actuality and thus to lose his innocence and fall into existence, but fears the transition. Thus, in effect, man places a command on himself, a command which he eventually chooses to break.⁹ (Tillich goes so far as to cite approvingly the gnostic myth of the "transcendent fall of souls" in support of his position.¹⁰)

Now an ontology grounded in affirmation of the goodness of the creation would have several objections to Tillich's approach. First of all, such an ontology rejects the very notion of existence as a fall from being and with it the notion of existence emerging from a split between potentiality and actuality. Existence, in what we may call its normal, unfallen state, its created state, is in fact an organic unity of potentiality and actuality. The split between them only occurs when existents disobey, and it is only in consequence of disobedience that the opening up of non-actualized potentiality as a power of non-being occurs. In the normal state, potentiality is always and only the power of the actual to be and to act, it is never a

power in itself, and so the fact of existence, the very fact that there are existents that “stand out,” does not in and of itself generate a split into potentiality and actuality. It is disobedience which brings about the split. In fact, the concept of existents as “standing out” might more usefully be understood, not as a standing out of the existent from relative non-being (potentiality, the *me on*), but rather as a standing out from other existents, that is, a standing out in the otherness and distinction each existent has in relation to all other existents. But this standing out does not mean a split in being but is in fact the basis of the community of beings, since it is only in multiplicity and thus in the relation of otherness and distinction that community is possible. If being qua being is understood as a universal grounded in the community of beings (existents), then existents do not stand out from being as being but rather stand out from one another and thus constitute (“stand together,” by etymology) the community which is being as being. It is only when being is understood as preceding existence that it becomes possible to see existence as a fall from being.

It is thus not difficult to understand why Tillich gives such short shrift to the concept of disobedience in his effort to “deliteralize” the Fall. He seems able to attach no significance to the notion that a free existent, living in a right relationship, as an actual, finite existent, to his Creator, might be commanded to abide in this right relationship and to refrain from trying to rise above his actual existence and his creaturehood, but dismisses this understanding of the matter as fundamentalism. Tillich’s understanding of the Fall is thus in radical opposition to the Christian understanding. Whereas, for Tillich, the Fall is a fall from a state “above” existence into existence, for the Church it is a fall from a perfect existence into a disordered existence resulting precisely from man’s rebellious effort to rise above existence.¹¹

The opposition of being and essence discussed above comes to its fullest clarity in Tillich’s thought, especially in relation to his understanding of revelation, when we look at the concept of life which he struggles with throughout Volume III of the *Systematic Theology*.¹² While his concept of life is a derivative one and not an elemental one, drawn as it is from his concepts of essential being and existence, it is the focal point of his thinking. Both being and existence are in a sense for him abstractions, whereas life is the point at which they meet in the world and converge to form the becoming which is, in some sense, the cosmos.¹³ Now life is basically reality in

its aspect as motion, becoming, action. In a real sense, action could be seen as the “essence” of life. For Tillich, life is ambiguous because it has its source not only in our essential being but also in the conditions of existence which in some sense constitute the principle of evil. Given this understanding of life, all action must be ambiguous. Indeed, this ambiguity of action is, one suspects, the fundamental experiential source for Tillich’s concept of the ambiguity of life.

Clearly, the experience of the ambiguity of action is a real one. We know, as a matter of painful experience, that even our best and noblest actions are contaminated with evil, lead to unforeseen consequences, etc., and, of course, even our worst actions may contain elements of nobility. The question which must be dealt with, and this would appear to be the area where Tillich is most vulnerable, is that of the underlying cause of this ambiguity.



The issue becomes clearer if we look at the concept which seems to be central to Tillich’s philosophy of action, the idea of action as self-transcendence.¹⁴ For Tillich, this means that in acting, the finite, existent creature tries to move beyond itself to the Infinite, the creature tries to reach out and embrace the essential being which, ultimately, is the ground of being, but because it is trapped in existence, in actuality, it always falls short of this and the term of its action is always something less than the infinite ground, something which is itself actual and existent and which, if treated as the end of the effort at self-transcendence, comes to be treated as if it were itself the ground, itself ultimate and infinite. It therefore becomes demonic and destructive. Thus the tragic element in all action, which seeks to reach out beyond its finitude and ends up generating demonic “structures of destruction.”

This understanding of the ambiguity of action and hence of life makes sense if we accept an ontology such as Tillich’s, with its dualistic picture of the world in which existence is the evil principle and essential being the good. Now existence is really the principle of finitude, since it is the principle of actuality, the principle in virtue of which a thing has boundaries by which it is what it is and is not anything else. Essential being, however,

is in some sense a principle of infinity (though Tillich pays lip service to “essential finitude”). The principle of essence underlying actual, individuated “thinghood” is a principle which, in itself, separate from its actualization in existents, does not involve limits. As an opposing principle to that of actuality, it is a potentiality and thus is a form of nothingness.

Now, for Tillich, the ambiguity of action (and hence of life) stems from the fact that, while it has its roots in essential being (=potentiality, infinity), which gives it its goodness, it continually falls into existence (=actuality, finitude). Now, potentiality is, in the conscious being, in some sense equivalent to subjectivity, so that, for Tillich, the problem seems to be that in action, subjectivity, grounded in the infinity of “essential being,” is always losing its substance in finite, actual existence and action. In this sense, action per se is a fall - it is a loss of universal, infinite substance and thus it is estrangement.

However, for any ontology which affirms the goodness of existence, the opposite view of action is necessary. For such a view, too, action is self-transcendence, or the attempt at self-transcendence. But for this view, self-transcendence means, first and foremost, transcendence of subjectivity. Action thus understood is a movement of the self by which it moves out of the primary, limitless identity known as subjectivity and reaches out toward what is other and hence actual, and, in the process, becomes itself an actual, bounded self, no longer a pure subject. Action is self-transcendent because it transcends subjectivity. The ambiguity of action stems from the fact that something in us resists the movement out of the pure potentiality of subjectivity into the actuality of the self-other structure of reality. That in us there is a demonic will, even in what we regard as our best actions, to cling to subjectivity and to try to impose it on the other, to unmake the actual, drawing it back into the pure potentiality of subjectivity, rather than to surrender subjectivity to the requirements of the object to which we are called to become subject. The demonic will to remain in subjectivity and identity seems to correspond to the “other law in my members” of which St. Paul speaks: “For I do not do the good I want but the evil I do not want is what I do ... But I see in my members another law at war with the law in my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members.”¹⁵

The crucial difference between the two views is

this: For Tillich, the ambiguity, the element of demonic evil present in even the best actions, is rooted in the very ontological structure of things and thus is, in principle, inevitable and unavoidable. Despite the lip service he pays to freedom, this evil inherent in all action has, for him, nothing to do with the creature’s free choice of evil, but is simply a structural element of the cosmos. For the second view, on the contrary, evil involves the creature’s choice not to go completely beyond subjectivity but to remain within the closed system of its own primary, non-actual identity. The Fall is thus not something grounded in the very structure of the world but is grounded in sin. For genuinely Christian theology there is, in principle, the possibility of actual life under the “conditions of existence” which is unambiguous life; that is, the possibility of action which transcends pure subjectivity in the movement into selfhood in relation to a world, action which completely gives up subjectivity and thus is action in obedience. There is nothing in the very structure of the world which prevents this obedience. It is prevented by the secondary “structures of destruction” which are the structures of the fallen world, but which are intelligibly and demonstrably not the primary structures of the world but rather a secondary, pathological growth. If Tillich were to try to state what man would be like if he had not fallen (a project he would no doubt eschew), he would probably present a picture of man as pure potentiality, uncontaminated by actuality.¹⁶ The idea of an existent, unfallen man would be absurd to him, as existence and the Fall are for him inseparable. For orthodox Christians, in contrast, an unfallen man would be an actually existent man who is wholly actual, who has died to his merely potential self and become an actual self living in relation to the world and in obedience to God. For Tillich, sin is just a state of things inevitable given existence. For Christians, sin, no matter how practically inevitable in the life of the individual and the community, has its roots in the evil will. For Tillich, there can be no real redemption from this state of things short of an abolition of existence.¹⁷ The Church, in contrast, expects redemption as the fullness of existence, its complete freeing from the negative infinity which is always trying to absorb it.

Parenthetically, the above considerations give us some insight into the ideological functions of liberal theology in justifying existing evils. When evil is equated with existence and thus comes to be seen as integral to the ontological structure, compounded, as it is, of the dual principles of essential being and existence, then evil

itself may cease to be taken really seriously and thus lose, in our consciousness, its radical character as evil. The tendency, then, will be, not to see good and evil as ultimately opposed principles but to see both simply as aspects of some sort of cosmic process moving toward a telos (or something the thinker imagines to be a telos), and this is gnosticism pure and simple. If evil is a necessary component of the structure or process of the world, then it is not really evil. In fact, once we begin to look at it this way, we may well conclude that the only real evil is interference with the cosmic process, and thus even opposition to what is normally understood to be evil may come to be seen as itself evil.

The problem is that for Christians evil is something that, no matter how pervasive it may be, need not be. For the Christian, there is the possibility and the hope of a genuine life which is not ambiguous, in which there is no mixture of good and evil, but only good (“God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all”¹⁸). This means that the real possibility of unambiguous, existent life in a right relationship to God is there as a measure or norm against which we can judge the actual evils found in life, not by any ontological necessity, but by the misuse of created freedom. But if the state of purely good, unambiguous life is not a real possibility and expectation but only a hypothetical reality whose existence would actually contradict the ontological structure of things (since existence itself is the evil principle), then to use this merely hypothetical reality as a norm for judging the evil in what actually exists is, one suspects, to try to hold a very weak and ultimately untenable position. It amounts to saying that the good has no power in the cosmos and never will have any, and, given this situation, to use the vision of the good as a norm to measure the actual is, in the end, no more than an impotent cry of protest, however admirable it may seem. In the end, the “realists,” the worldly-wise, will side with what is, and be, in a way, right in saying that there is no point in taking any other position. If evil is simply part of the ontological structure of things, it is difficult to see what point there could be in objecting to the murder of 6 million Jews by the National Socialists or to the annual slaughter of approximately 1.5 million unborn children by nice middle-

class Americans. In the end, the position that evil is a part of the ontological structure of things cannot help but reduce to the principle that “the real is rational and the rational is real,” i.e., that whatever is, is good.

If evil is simply a part of the ontological structure of things and not, as Christians hold, a radical violation of that structure by that which seeks to destroy the creation, then the very concept of evil is diluted and loses much of its meaning. Instead of fighting evil with every nerve in our bodies, we end up becoming sensible, middle-class, liberal church-goers who can sit back and relax in a placid acceptance of life’s ambiguities, perhaps rationalized with a dose of situation ethics. The horror of evil as the enemy of all life is forgotten in such an atmosphere, and our perspective is flattened to the level of what pragmatically is. In this way, “existentialist” theology, as represented by Tillich and too many others, assumes the function of ideological legitimation of a society whose fundamental premises are increasingly anti-Christian.

It is thus clear that Tillich’s ontology is a radically anti-Christian one in that it negates the goodness of existence and hence of the creation, and thus its pretense to be in correlation with revelation is an ideological lie. It remains to be seen what happens when someone tries to force revelation into such a correlation, that is, when someone like Tillich tries to construct a theory of revelation which is consistent with such an ontology. This will be the theme of the concluding discussion.

II

The effort to understand how Tillich’s ontology affects his concept of revelation may usefully begin with a consideration of the relation between his devaluation of existence and his rejection of supernaturalism.¹⁹ Tillich cannot tolerate supernaturalism, understood here as the possibility of God breaking into the ordinary order of the existent world, fundamentally because he hates existence. He identifies existence with the Fall and thus sees the latter as a fall into existence. Really, for Tillich, the idea of finite beings existing with their own act of existence, distinct from God and with a capacity to act freely


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even against God's will, is intolerable, yet it is only in relation to such a situation that one could conceive of revelation breaking in, as if from outside. For Tillich, the divine, in relation to creatures, is not something that could be thought of as "outside" but is simply their deepest being and meaning, their ground. Tillich sees being as a kind of monistic unity consisting of "finite" creatures which are not really distinct from their Creator but have their deepest essence and ground in Him (It?).²⁰ This being the case, revelation is simply a universal process by which finite beings find their way back to their ground, which is their real substance (qua existent and finite, they have no substance) and in so doing cease to be finite insofar as they cease to be existent.

This understanding is clearly incompatible with a supernaturalist theology of revelation, since for the ground to break in on that of which it is the ground would simply mean the ground being in conflict with itself; an absurdity given the monistic idea of unity Tillich is so attached to. However, if we move from this notion of unity to a concept of a unity of community linking God and the world, a covenant unity, then conflict becomes possible because it is possible for creatures to violate the covenant and thus disrupt the community, and it is in turn possible for the Creator to break in on the wounded creaturely community in order to heal and save it. For Tillich, such a thing amounts to supernaturalism and is an absurdity.

His Christology reflects the same perspective. For Tillich, the human part of Christ, the Jesus part, as the medium of the revelation of the ground, had to die wholly so that the Christ part, the ground, could live.²¹ This means, in effect, that for Tillich, the merely human, the created and finite, the existent, is inherently deficient and must die to make way for the Infinite. Orthodox Christian theology, in contrast, looks for a genuine resurrection of the flesh, that is, for a redemption of the existent so that it can live, as existent, in a right relation to the Creator without ceasing to be existent and finite. Tillich's devaluation of existence forces him to pervert Christian theology into a gnostic theology which sees the created world, not simply as fallen, but as, *qua* existent, the realm of darkness from which the *illuminati* must seek escape, presumably by finding or inventing the appropriately transparent symbols which will reveal their ground to them.

elation and redemption must be found in his ontology, especially in his understanding of existence and in the relation of this understanding to his theology of the Fall. Because Tillich identifies man's fallen state with the creation as such, i.e., with existence, he cannot understand the Fall as an event, that is, as a particular, but only as a constituent of existence as such and hence as a universal. Since the source of man's fallen condition, his condition of alienation from himself, from God, and from the world, is identified simply with existence and not with a specific act of disobedience on the part of existents, it would seem improbable that the situation could be remedied by a particular act of God which is also a particular act of obedience by an existent.²² Since the fallen condition is a universal structure of existence and thus is timeless, revelation and redemption must also be, in some real sense, timeless and universal structures of being which, however, unfold in some sort of historical-temporal "process."²³ When such a theology deals with revelation, it must understand by the latter, not an act in which God invades time and space and acts decisively within and for the world, but rather as a timeless presence of the divine as the ground of all temporal existence, in correlation with a historical-temporal evolutionary process in which, within human thought and culture, symbols emerge which are progressively more and more suited to show the timeless ground to us.²⁴ Similarly, redemption can only mean the historical emergence of human beings whose lives are more and more adequate symbols of transcendence, who can be seen as more and more in a right relation to the timeless ground, so that their existence epitomizes a human possibility of existence in a right relation to the ground.²⁵ Clearly, this is a theology of self-divinization, an understanding of redemption in which the human self, the flesh, becomes the Logos of God and not the reverse. Tillich's general bias against existence and thus against particular events, manifested in its roots in his ontology with its identification of existence with the Fall, inevitably poisons his concept of revelation and redemption, since he must deny them a status as events and hence as particulars, and must reduce them to something which can be deduced from the notion of being-itself. Like all ideologues, Tillich rejects particularity and hence otherness and tries to reduce all apparent particularity to an underlying pure identity.²⁶ Hence there is no room in his system for revelation and redemption as events with their own particularity and hence otherness which break into this identity.

Thus the key to Tillich's understanding of rev-

The issues at stake here may be understood a little

more clearly in light of the following considerations. Man's fallen state, his "estrangement," can be understood from an orthodox perspective in the following way: Reality (being) is a community because it is the composition of identity and difference, not a unity grounded in identity alone. In a sense, our estrangement has to do with the fact that we endlessly seek a unity which is identity alone; we seek to draw all things back into identity. But identity is in a sense equivalent to potentiality, which, in turn, is equivalent to subjectivity. Thus the Fall must be understood as a rebellion against actuality, which is equivalent to otherness, which is, in turn, equivalent, in a sense, to existence. Now it would appear that man's natural religion is grounded in identity and can see otherness only as an illusion which is ultimately reducible to identity. For such a perspective, revelation is the process by which, in the course of the history of religious symbolism, symbols emerge which have the power to show us, i.e., to reveal to us, the identity underlying the illusion of otherness.

In contrast, for orthodoxy it is revelation precisely as the self-manifestation, not controllable by or reducible to our subjectivity of the Wholly Other, which gives us a clear view of what otherness means.

Thus Tillich's theology, while purporting to be a theology of revelation, in fact tries to eliminate revelation in favor of a purely "religious" perspective which renounces otherness and falls back into identity as the ultimate principle and source of unity.

Tillich's problem with this whole area of unity and otherness emerges clearly when we examine a recurrent theme in his work: the impropriety of thinking of God as a being alongside other beings, even though a "Supreme Being."²⁷ This is an issue which perhaps needs to be looked at a little more closely. While it is a truism to say that God is not simply one more finite being alongside the rest (this would reduce Him to the status of a creature and leave the question of the Creator still open), one must question whether the appropriate alter-

native to this is simply to place God wholly beyond being in the sense of a community of individual beings (existents) which are mutually other; to place God beyond the polarity of Same and Other and thus simply to make Him something like the dimension of depth or ground of all things. While the terminology which calls God the Supreme Being certainly leaves much to be desired, one



must question whether the term "ground of being" is an adequate substitute for it.

The matter could be approached in this way: When we say that something is a being alongside other beings, we are also saying that it is a being over against other beings, i.e., that it is not simply there in and for itself but is also there confronting other beings as an other. This otherness is so very much what makes a being a being that one might even go so far as to define being universally as the community of othernesses. Yet it must be remembered that we do not encounter the otherness in every being simply by a closed experience of finite beings - rather, the light in which their otherness becomes visible is precisely God's otherness, manifest in and through His revelation. In a sense, the otherness of creatures is otherness only in a very limited, analogous sense - it is a shadow of the real otherness which is God's.

Now, if we define being as the quality of otherness which every being has in relation to others and, in a real sense, even in relation to itself, then clearly God is in some way a being, an other, pre-eminently. That is, He is a something having a reality not simply as the dimension of depth in or the ground of our being, but as an otherness standing over against us. This being the case, we cannot quite escape speaking of Him, at times, as though He were a being alongside other beings. The quality of being an individual, a solid substance and thus an otherness over against other individuals, is one which God possesses properly and creatures only analogously. Since God is the prime analogate in the analogy of being, if we take the otherness away from Him, we take it away from creatures, and thus the otherness which creatures possess in relation to God and to one another is lost and

the community of beings is lost. But to speak of God as an otherness over against the otherness of creatures is to assume the risk of speaking of Him as a being alongside other beings, and this risk cannot be avoided. In his zeal to avoid it, Tillich sacrifices God's otherness and hence the integrity of the creation as having its own created otherness and thus existence. He loses the sense of a created world with its own created power of being not identical with God's power of being (for "power of being," here read "otherness"), and this structure of being and creation is reduced to a bland identity which has no power of being at all.

Tillich's problem relating existence to revelation is also manifest in his struggles with the issue of the relation of faith to propositional truth. Tillich repeatedly stresses his opposition to the tendency of so-called "literalists" to see faith as somehow related to statements of propositional truth, which, as such, have the possibility of not being true.²⁸ Now it is obvious enough that few would actually go so far as to define faith as the assertion of such propositions. That is, few would make such assertions the essence of faith, and in this sense, Tillich's objection is correct though trivial. But if we ask whether the assertion of propositions is in any way entailed in faith, even though not of its essence, it is difficult to see how it could be otherwise. One could argue as follows: Faith must be understood, first and foremost, as faithfulness, that is, as a standing firm, on our part, in the covenant relationship which Christ has established between God and man, and this standing firm is clearly not, as such, an act of the intellect affirming or denying. However, the act of standing firm in the covenant relationship clearly presupposes an assertion, namely, that the covenant relationship exists at all, and thus it presupposes the affirmation that Jesus Christ actually lived, that He died and rose again, etc. Anyone who refuses to assert the truth of these central dogmas in effect moves outside the covenant relationship into a kind of relationship to Christian symbols in which the symbols function only to generate a subjective sense of well-being. To say, for example, that one stands firm in the covenant while denying the factual occurrence of the Resurrection is ultimately absurd. One can go on indefinitely talking about the Resurrection as a symbol or myth expressing the early Church's understanding that Christ's apparent defeat on the Cross was actually a victory, but if Christ did not really rise, what possible difference can it make?²⁹ What kind of victory over death did Christ really win if his body still lies in a grave somewhere?

It should be noted that the Greek noun *pistis* has a wide range of meanings, including on the one hand the idea of confidence, assurance, trust, etc., and, on the other, that of belief that something is the case. It is difficult to see any reason for Christian theology to exclude this belief element from its concept of faith. The attempt to do so appears simply to reflect the effort to retain a subjective feeling of confidence and assurance without asserting that there are any grounds for this confidence other than subjectivity itself. This, again, is a way to keep everything under the governance of the principle of identity and thus to avoid all assertions which are not tautologies.

Finally, Tillich's devaluation of existence, and hence of particularity, is reflected in his understanding of the relation of the human, existent Jesus to His function as the Christ. His discussion of the meaning of the name "Christ" brings the central issue to a clear focus. Tillich spends some time in Volume II of the *Systematic Theology* explaining the rather obvious fact that the name Christ (*Christos*) is not a proper name, is not a surname of Jesus, but rather is a title indicating Jesus' function as the Anointed One, the bearer of the "New Being."³⁰ This analysis is certainly correct insofar as it pertains to the etymology of the Greek word *Christos* as meaning "anointed one," and insofar as it indicates the cultural background of the concept of the *Christos* or *Messiah*. However, it is all too easy to conduct such a linguistic and cultural analysis in a reductionistic manner, forgetting that in the Word of God in revelation the divine is not drawn down into the human, the cultural, but rather the latter is taken up into the Word. Tillich has a tendency to give the cultural a kind of primacy, and thus it is not surprising that in this case he gives primacy to the various meanings assigned to the concept of the *Christos* by pre-Christian culture. If we follow him in this, then we will tend to treat the concept *Christos* as if it were a universal to which Jesus belongs as a particular, as one of a multiplicity of possible *Christoi*, or perhaps even as one of a multiplicity of actual *Christoi* who have existed or will exist in time or who exist in different parts of space. Tillich's discussion of the question what meaning Christ would have as the bearer of the "New Being" in the event of a loss of historical continuity with His revelation, or in the event of the existence of rational creatures in other parts of the universe, indicates clearly that he does indeed see Jesus as one of many possible Christs.³¹ For him the name Jesus and the title Christ are not linked together essentially but only accidentally. In contrast, it

must be maintained, from an orthodox perspective, that for Christians the universal *Christos* and the particular Jesus are indissolubly linked - i.e., that Jesus, while a particular man in a particular time and place and culture, contains in Himself, exhaustively, the whole of what *Christos* means; that He is the entire universal, so that there never has been nor could be another Christ. For this reason, we may argue that the symbol *Christos*, once taken up into the Word of God, ceases to be a title only but becomes in fact a proper name of Jesus, so that, in this way, the popular misunderstanding by uneducated Christians of what the name Christ means ends up, by accident, having a kind of truth. But Tillich, by insisting on keeping the *Christos* function separate from the name Jesus, in effect is attempting to protect the Christ-element, with its non-existent universality, as a symbol of the ground, from contamination by the existent, actual, particular man, Jesus of Nazareth. This leaves us free to reject whatever we might conceive as merely human or cultural in Jesus (i.e., as merely existent) while accepting His function as the Christ in union with the ground. Thus Tillich's devaluation of existence ultimately leads him to feel he must choose between Jesus and the Christ.

What clearly emerges from the discussion of Tillich's attitude toward existence and the impact of this attitude on the understanding of revelation, is the fact that, ultimately, Tillich cannot deal with the idea of God acting in time and history in His revelation, because action is too closely tied to actuality and hence to existence. Actuality implies limit. It implies, as action, the choice of something which excludes something else, and so, for Tillich, it is the loss of universal being and is thus evil. He is therefore forced to construct an elaborate theory of revelation which effectively eliminates action from God, leaving the dirty work of action to creatures, who are already corrupted by existence anyway. Thus, rather than tolerate a revelation history in which God acts to reveal Himself to man in His own time and in His own way, Tillich must invent a revelation history which is a human cultural history, a history of the evolution of symbols. The crucial point in understanding Tillich's idea of revelation is that for him, while God may be, in some sense,

the object of revelation (i.e., that which is revealed), He is not the subject of revelation, the One who does the revealing. Rather, for Tillich, revelation is a function of the symbol. Thus, his is a world-picture in which the ground of being is simply given, along with the beings who are grounded in it. Their relation is essentially fixed and unchangeable: the ground does not act or do anything to make itself known. What happens is that, in the course of human history and culture, symbols emerge which, more or less adequately, reveal the ground to us. This becomes a kind of revelation history to the extent that, as history unfolds, more and more perfect symbols emerge until finally, in Jesus as the Christ, we have a symbol which is ultimate because it is wholly transparent to the ground: it totally negates its concrete, finite (existent) content so that the ground can shine through. It is obvious then that, in Tillich's view, God does not reveal Himself, but rather, symbols reveal God. More precisely, since symbols, while not in a strict sense a product of human making, are certainly, like all cultural phenomena, an emergent from human activity and human interaction, then clearly, in Tillich's view, it is man who reveals God to himself. Thus his theology is fundamentally one of self-salvation; that is, one in which man takes hold of God and incorporates Him into himself, leaving God with little or nothing to say about the matter. Such a theology has nothing in common with the orthodox Christian theology which sees God acting freely to reveal Himself to man and to redeem man. It is not a Christian theology at all but rather a gnostic theology reflecting the situation in which man (to use Voegelin's expression) seeks to "draw the spirit of God" into himself.³² And, in the absence of any real understanding of God as other, it must ultimately be a theology which sees man, in revealing God to himself, simply revealing his own deepest substance to himself. Thus it must be a theology of human self-deification through the escape from existence. Starting from an ontology which, in rejecting existence, rejects the creation and thus is radically at odds with revelation, Tillich's theological system can only end with a theology of revelation which does away with its own object, and clearly unmasks itself as an expression of modern man's rejection of revelation.



NOTES

1Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I (Chicago, 1951), p. 61. The three volumes of this work will be cited throughout the present essay simply as ST I, II, and III.

2ST I, p. 4, p. 49.

3The ontological perspective of the present essay, while basically the author's own in the particular form in which it is presented here, has its roots in the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition of Christian philosophy. A particularly good source for the discussion of the relationship between revelation and ontology which is axiomatic here is Etienne Gilson's *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* (New York, 1940).

4ST I, pp. 202-204, II, pp. 19-21.

5ST II, pp. 21-24.

6ST II, pp. 19-21.

7ST II, p. 21.

8ST II, pp. 29-44.

9ST II, p. 35.

10ST II, p. 37.

11The hatred of existence on the part of gnostic theologians may partially explain their resistance to being pinned down to precise statements as to what they really believe. For instance, such theologians would certainly never say that Christ is divine - however, one is very unlikely to find one of them explicitly denying the divinity of Christ. To make a clear and explicit statement is to make a statement about existence and thus to give existence some importance and some reality, and this they are unwilling to do. They studiously avoid dragging their pure, gnostic spirituality through the mud of existence. This, even more than fear of the orthodox (no real concern in recent years), may explain the atmosphere of vagueness and unclarity which characterizes their thinking whenever any central doctrinal issue is at stake. It is a trait which makes it very difficult to argue with such thinkers, for inevitably, in interpreting them, one must read between the lines and impose some conceptual order on the murky chaos of what they explicitly say. But then they are in a position to respond by denying that they ever said such things, by accusing their partner in debate of putting words in their mouths, being a "heresy hunter," etc. Yet not to do some reading between the lines would be to try to argue with gnostic theologians on their own ground and to give up any effort at conceptual precision or clarity.

12See especially ST III, pp. 11-110, "Life, Its Ambiguities, and the Quest for Unambiguous Life."

13ST III, p. 12.

14ST III, p. 30, pp. 86-106.

15Romans 7:19,23 (RSV).

16This appears to be what his notion of Adam's "dreaming innocence" amounts to - see ST II, pp. 33-36.

17His extensive discussion of "The Kingdom of God as the End of History" in ST III, pp. 394-425, appears to reflect this outlook.

18I John 1:5 (RSV).

19 "Supernaturalism" is used here in preference to Tillich's "supranaturalism" as representing the more common English usage.

20Tillich's thinking on this issue finds its clearest expression in ST II, pp. 5-10.

21ST I, pp. 135-137.

22See ST II, pp. 130-131, on this issue.

23ST II, pp. 109-110.

24ST I, pp. 137-144, p. 156.

25ST II, pp. 86-88.

26E.g., ST II, pp. 129-131.

27ST I, pp. 235-241.

28E.g., ST I, pp. 129-131, ST III, p. 130.

29Tillich's discussion of the "symbol" "Resurrection of the Christ" in ST II, pp. 153-58 is a clear example of his inability to deal with this issue.

30ST II, pp. 97-98, 88-90.

31ST II, pp. 99-101.

32Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago, 1952), p. 125.