
THE PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY OF PAUL TILLICH

BY

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PAUL TILLICH has been hailed as "the most enlightening and therapeutic theologian of our time". He was born in 1886 in Germany and because of his opposition to HITLER, he sought refuge in New York in 1933, where he became a professor of philosophical theology at Union Theological Seminary. At present he is University Professor at Harvard University.

His main work is his Systematic Theology, a critical analysis of which constitutes the major part of this essay. Since only the first Volume of TILLICH's Systematic Theology¹⁾ has been published to date, our final evaluation is tentative. However, together with his many other writings, the first volume affords a sufficient basis to warrant a critical estimate of TILLICH's thought.

TILLICH seeks to correlate philosophy, driven to ultimate existential questions, with a theology alone capable of giving an answer (8). The contents of the Christian faith is to be explained through existential questions and theological answers. Theology analyzes the human situation in which existential questions appear, and then demonstrates that the *symbols* of the Christian message provide the answer.

The maintenance of a proper balance between eternal truth and the temporal situation, in which it is received, makes it possible to escape orthodoxy and fundamentalism which fail to make past truth relevant to the situation, the total creative self-interpretation of existence (3).

TILLICH's position makes the content of the message dependent upon the historical situation in which it is received. In this self-manifestation to man God is dependent on the way man receives his manifestation.

The "eternal truth" which is at the foundation of the Christian message lacks any permanent concrete meaning. It must be re-interpreted for every new generation.

But if such is the case why is TILLICH's own interpretation of the "eternal truth" itself not in need of an immediate re-interpretation. In what sense does a "generation" re-interpret a truth? What does "generation" refer to? How is such a period circumscribed? Must the message be re-interpreted every decade?

Why speak of eternal truth in the first place when all we can know is a series of changing interpreted truths?

In seeking to speak to the cultural situation of our time, TILLICH

¹⁾ Except where otherwise indicated page references given in parenthesis refer to Vol. I of Systematic Theology.

assumes, as we shall see, that his own analysis constitutes *the correct* framework in which the "eternal truth" is to be interpreted.

Such a contention is highly presumptuous, in spite of TILLICH's many penetrating observations with respect to 20th century culture.

TILLICH's reproach of orthodoxy and fundamentalism fails to distinguish between the many orthodox currents within the past history of the church and within present day Christianity. The assumption that a proper balance needs to be maintained between eternal truth and the temporal situation presupposes without evidence that all expressions of truth are historically relative.

Orthodoxy does not necessarily elevate something finite and transitory to something infinite and of eternal validity. It recognizes with St. Paul that we now see through a glass darkly, but it begs the question to assume that the propositions of historical Christianity lack validity with respect to the present condition of humanity. To assume that orthodox theologians lack "humble honesty" in their search for truth and are necessarily fanatical because truths are suppressed by them, betrays a lack of appreciation of the work of such men as ABRAHAM KUYPER, H. BAVINCK, BERKOUWER, H. RIDDERBOS, B. B. WARFIELD, and. H. DOOYEWEERD.

TILLICH is correct that the success or failure of orthodox or liberal ideas does not guarantee their truth but it is equally valid that the favorable response to his own position does not assure its validity.

From the Christian point of view theology ought not to be simply a response to man's self-interpretation within a given period, but it ought to constitute part of the framework in which the truth claim of such a response is judged and evaluated.

For TILLICH theology is based on an a priori of experience and upon valuation. Its basic concepts are rooted in a direct experience of something which is ultimate in value, of which there is an intuitive awareness, an awareness that goes beyond any distinction between a subject and an object.

But to base theology on a "mystical a priori" is to make it purely subjective and independent of any criterion other than a subjective commitment. Experience is never in touch with anything "ultimate". How would it ever be possible to know that the object of intuitive awareness is not itself conditioned by the human situation? If theology is to be more than a poetic expression of feeling it must refer to a revelation which is given. It is true that God is not the proper object of theology in the sense that things of nature are the object of scientific research. TILLICH assumes without question the erroneous character of the historical Christian position, that God has revealed Himself to man, in the course of human events, and that He is known in Biblical revelation, so that the faith of the Christian refers, in the last analysis, to events enacted and recorded by the Biblical writers, as witnesses of that which they had seen and heard.

TILLICH holds that the theologian is committed to the Christian message. He operates within a framework which, in spite of doubt, acknowledges that it is his ultimate concern.

But the content of the Christian message is not found in the Bible, as the only source. God's Word is not limited or identical with the Bible (4).