

## TILlich, THE TRINITY AND HONEST TO GOD.

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"Indeed, though we shall not of course be able to do it, I can at least understand what those mean who urge that we should do well to give up using the word 'God' for a generation, so impregnated has it become with a way of thinking we may have to discard if the Gospel is to signify anything."<sup>1</sup>

John A. T. Robinson, bishop of Woolwich, is speaking of what he calls the supranaturalistic view of God, which follows the Bible literally as it "speaks of a God 'up there' and pictures a three decker universe of 'the heaven above, the earth beneath, and the waters under the earth.'"<sup>2</sup> Continuing in the same strain he writes: "This picture of a god 'out there' coming to earth like some visitor from outer space underlies every popular presentation of the Christian drama of salvation, whether from the pulpit or the presses."<sup>3</sup>

Robinson proposes that in place of the God "out there" or "up there" we accept the concept of God presented by Paul Tillich, namely "the god above God"<sup>4</sup> which is Being-Itself, or the Power of Being, and which is present in everything while yet being absent.

Paul Tillich too wonders if the very name 'God' may not have to be abandoned in order to make room for and understand a new concept for God. He writes: "The name of this infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being is *God*. That depth is what the word *God* means. And if that word has not much meaning for you, translate it, and speak of the depths of your life, of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern . . . Perhaps, in order to do so, you must forget everything traditional that you have learned about God, perhaps even that word itself."<sup>5</sup>

The existential theology of our day which has among its proponents Rudolf Bultmann, the late Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Robinson, finds its most able theologian in Paul Tillich. His ontological theology offers their best presentation of a new modern existential concept of God. Tillich has the prestige of originating this new God. Robinson, however, it would appear from the phenomenal success of his book *Honest To God*, will have the fame for putting it into everyday language and popularizing it among the theologians, the clergy and the laity.

### I. *What does Tillich teach about God?*

a) Paul Tillich insists that God can only be spoken of in a symbolic manner. If this is not done we make God into an object, and if an object one object beside others and therefore finite.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, he concludes God cannot either be a person—for then he would be a person among other persons and be limited by them<sup>7</sup>—nor is he a being or the highest being,<sup>8</sup> since, "if God is a being, he is subject to the categories of finitude, especially to space and substance."<sup>9</sup> Nor does he even exist as the theistic arguments set out to prove, for they end in making him into the "missing link" in a causal chain.<sup>10</sup>

If this Being is not personal how is it to be described? It is supra-personal and sub-personal. It has self-centeredness without self-consciousness. It appears in the subconscious and unconscious elements in man,<sup>11</sup> in things, even of an organic nature<sup>12</sup> and in the semantics of words.<sup>13</sup> It may be said to be pantheistically present everywhere, even though it is not a substance or an essence. It is by the assertion of the presence of this power in himself that man is enabled to face the forces of destruction and to conquer reality.<sup>14</sup>

II. *What causes Being to be active and creative if it is not personal in any true sense?*

Tillich answers, Non-Being. How is this second principle to be explained? In the following manner: for everything we can think of we can think of an opposite: for good, bad; for beautiful, ugly; and for being, non-being. It is non-being, the logical opposite of being, which makes God active; otherwise he would be the "Unmoved Mover" of Aristotle.<sup>15</sup> Non-being is logically posterior to Being and entirely dependent upon being for its nature and characteristics; therefore, it cannot be considered as a second ultimate.<sup>16</sup>

It causes mere Being to become Being-Itself or the Power of Being. In this development we discover that Tillich, in order to explain creation by a universally present impersonal power, has adopted Hegel's basic and primal dialectic triad, being, non-being and becoming, making no alteration in thesis and the antithesis and only a slight one in the synthesis as it changed from becoming to Power of Being.

At this point Tillich either considers there is more to God as creator than Hegel allowed for, or else adopts Rudolph Otto's view of a rational and a non-rational development of the concept of God,<sup>17</sup> since he next speaks of a dialectical development within God himself through first, second, and third principles. I myself would assume he is arguing that instead of adopting two explanations, as Otto did, he is proposing two stages in the development of God.

Assuming the above to be correct, this principle of the Power of Being is next identified by Tillich with what he calls the "first principle," and identifies with the Father and describes as a potential "abyss," "chaos," or "burning fire" except for the opposition of the "second principle namely the *logos* or "mirror of the divine depth which he identifies with the Son," which negates its destructive power.<sup>18</sup> Out of the dialectic between the two principles comes, by the principle of double negation, the "third principle", namely "Spirit", which is creative.<sup>19</sup> In his book *Love Power and Justice* Tillich puts it thus: "In his Son, God (the Father, A.K.) separates Himself from Himself, and in the Spirit He reunites Himself with Himself."<sup>20</sup>

To complete his point that God is not an object, Tillich insists that God is not even a logical object and therefore can only be spoken of symbolically even when called "Being-itself."<sup>21</sup>

### III. *What values does Tillich maintain are present in his view?*

For Tillich this explanation of God and his creative action appears to answer several important problems such as the following:

1) If God is infinite then by definition this excludes the possibility that he can be considered as a being who is objective in any sense. To make him an object is to place him beside other objects which automatically limit him, and therefore to deny his infinity.

2) The problems of communication, fellowship and knowledge, which arise for man because of subject-object relationships, can be eliminated in such a view of God, since subject-object relations are merged in him.

3) If true knowledge in God transcends the subject-object relationship the same must be true of the highest knowledge attainable by man, namely that possible in salvation.

4) There is no problem of a "God out there" for Being-Itself since it is just as much here as there. Since time, space, substance and causality are categories of finitude, God cannot be either localized or substantialized.

5) The things which emerge from the unconscious and the sub-conscious in

man, as revealed in art, culture and religion really do express God. They actually speak in a type of symbolism which can be interpreted.<sup>22</sup> Religion, and the Bible in particular is filled with the same symbolism.

#### IV. *What, if any, is the philosophy behind this view of God?*

First, we need to examine Tillich's problem with infinity. The Greek Sceptics tussled with the very same difficulties over a definition of the infinite and the absolute. Fichte quotes from them as he considers the problems they raised. Henry L. Mansel, in his book *The Limits of Religious Thought* (1858), introduced the questions raised by the Sceptics, and quoted by Fichte, and shook the theological foundations of British theology.<sup>23</sup> However, Charles Hodge in his *Systematic Theology* answered him in a clear, straightforward manner. Mansel, Fichte and the Sceptics had adopted the wrong definition of the infinite he said.<sup>24</sup> They thought of it in terms of immensity and space, as quantitative rather than qualitative! When we speak of God as infinite we are not referring to immensity but to moral qualities and creative and sustaining powers. God is a spirit infinite eternal and unchangeable in wisdom, power, holiness, goodness, justice and truth. We need to realize that there are infinities which do not exclude one another. We can think of an infinite line and not exclude other lines, and even of an infinite number of infinite lines. There is nothing illogical in such existing! Again the infinite is not necessarily limited even by the finite. For example, the infinite power and wisdom of God are not diminished or lessened by the fact man has some power and some wisdom. They are only demonstrated, and when properly displayed made a matter for praise and glory. They could not be admired and experienced by others, except God had created man, a creature in His own image, to enjoy them.

Tillich could have found the answer for his problems with infinity had he read Hodge. If that is too much to have expected of a German theologian, he could also have found the answer in Herman Bavinck's *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*.<sup>25</sup>

The argument that God was made creative through the operation of the triad being, non-being and power of being rests upon the main tenet of idealism: the really real is what is thought.

Tillich assumes that because we can think of the opposite of anything, therefore that opposite exists, not only as a mental concept but also as an actual ontological reality. If this is so then fancies, castles in the air, fairy tales, are just as real and affect reality just as much as actual decisions and real events. But this is the chief error of idealism and the reason it must be firmly rejected! We must distinguish between ideas which never receive ontological reality and those which correspond to and express reality. Strange to say Tillich sees this danger in Hegel as he writes, "the task of Existential philosophy was first of all to destroy this Hegelian 'reconciliation' which was merely conceptual, and left existence itself unreconciled."<sup>26</sup> While commending Trendelenberg and Marx for condemning Hegel and his transition from the logic of triadic thinking to reality, Tillich still uses Hegel's triadic logic as seen above!

Tillich has allowed his mistaken view of the infinite to become the basis of an argument to deny a subject-object relationship in God. This appears to him to be the only explanation which can save God from losing his transcendence, omnipresence and infinity.

Aristotle's concept of the unmoved mover ought to have been a warning at this juncture. He said that the Unmoved Mover was *actus purus*—so fully developed in every way, that in him every possibility had been actualized. And, in order to

defend his god from becoming, in any way, dependent upon the universe, he insisted the Unmoved Mover knew nothing, either of pure unformed matter or of all the evolutionary steps through which it advanced, due to the magnetic effects of god, to become active reason. Aristotle saw that should his god even come to know of the universe he would thereby immediately add to himself new relationships such as:

- a) A subject-object relationship for his god was only a subject;
- b) An I-Thou relationship for the Unmoved Mover was a lone unitary individual without the possibility in himself of a personal encounter.
- c) A We-You relationship, because he would then become involved with the world and men.

All religions and philosophies which are totally monistic in character, and only admit one original person or principle, are faced with this anomaly. The Christian Trinity alone offers a sound basis for a philosophy of God and creation, in which God does not need either creation or man to be fully developed. Actually Aristotle's theory of God had failed, but at least he saw the weakness in his view and did what he could to guard against it. Tillich, in contrast finds himself with no defense at this point, even as all pantheists along with all unitarians.

Tillich has chosen the wrong problem over which to exercise his concern because of starting philosophically with the Sceptics, instead of with Aristotle, and theologically with the Liberals and Neo-Orthodox rather than the Evangelicals.

The existence of the subject-object relationship within the Godhead eliminates the danger that the world and man will limit God.

#### V. *The Creeds and Confessions of the Church.*

Here we can be quite brief because they all agree in declaring that though God is one he consists in three persons.

The Westminster Confession of Faith says: "In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost." (II:3)

The Larger Catechism: "There be three persons in the Godhead: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, and these three are one true eternal God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory: although distinguished by their personal properties." (A. 9).

#### VI. *Theological Advantages and Disadvantages.*

What theological advantages do men such as Tillich and Robinson see in their view of God? Science has advanced to such a place that there is no space or place left in which God can dwell. Therefore, the "three story" universe of the Bible must be discarded, according to Robinson, and Bultmann in particular.<sup>27</sup> However, a pantheistic explanation of God such as Spinoza's *natura naturans*, or Tillich's Being-Itself, which offers a theory of an omnipresent God overcomes the problem of a place for him to dwell.

This view of God, with its accompanying *demytholization* and interpretation, enables the Liberal and the Neo-Orthodox to explain away much in the Scriptures to which they object such as God's wrath, Satan, Hell, etc.

However the adoption of a non-personal pantheistic god is a high price to pay in order to conform with modern scientific thought. It means that there can no longer be a real personal relationship with God, no real prayer, no direct communication and no propositional revelation. The joy and hope of a personal Re-

deemer is lost. Prayer is merely the assertion of the Power of Being, which is already present in us, in contrast to its negative principle Non-Being.<sup>28</sup> Revelation is an ineffable feeling which can be expressed only in symbols.

The Bible with all its revelation concerning man's fall, sin, and God's way of salvation, is surrendered in lieu of a theory of an unfolding principle called Being-Itself, with supra and sub-personal elements—even as present in man, things, symbols and words—but with no personal no personal self-consciousness or ability to communicate in words with his creatures. This leaves man with a God who is less than himself, at least in the areas that are most important, namely self-conscious rationality and rational propositional communication. Such a god is less developed than his creature man and finite at these points.

Tillich is convinced that his view does have the advantage of preserving a monistic system. Evil, as represented by Non-Being, is not a second principle of equal stature to good.<sup>29</sup> It is needed to make God dynamic. God needs it to make him the god of creation.

Theologically this view presents more difficulties than advantages. The system may be monotheistic but philosophically, as already seen, it gets Tillich and his followers into tremendous problems concerning god's self-sufficiency and actually destroys his perfection and infinity. Besides this it maintains that it takes a contradictory, and hence evil principle, to make god the god he is, namely a creative being. If this is so, God then needs evil since evil becomes a necessity if there is to be creation. Thus the real responsibility for evil rests on god since he cannot create without its aggravating awakening influence, and cannot bring man into existence without causing him to fall.

#### *The Reasonableness of the Biblical View of God.*

Up to this point we have endeavored to trace the outlines of this new view of god, to examine its philosophy, and to develop some of the results or conclusions to which it leads. Now let us turn from Tillich and Robinson, and their school of thought, to the Bible to see what it has to offer in contrast.

The Bible reveals a god who is a person and who has made man in His own image. Because both God and man are persons, possessing rationality, self-consciousness and moral natures, they can communicate intelligibly. Nevertheless, God did not create the universe and man because He needed them, nor did they augment or increase God when created. In himself God enjoyed all the relations which creation offers, namely the I-It subject-object relationship between the persons of the godhead, the I-Thou person to person relationship between Father and Son, etc., and the We-You or social relationship as any two of the persons of the Trinity joined to minister to the third. Thus the Triune God of the Bible alone meets this imperative philosophical problem and satisfies the need Aristotle sensed but his Unmoved Mover could not fill.

The Scriptures teach that the second person of the Trinity laid aside His glory for a time (Phil 3:5-8) and assumed true manhood by taking upon himself a true human nature. This, as man, he could lead a spotless life and keep God's law perfectly, then die under the penalty of the broken law as our substitute, sacrifice and atonement. The pantheistic god of this new school of theology has no persons—is not a true trinity—and can therefore accomplish no incarnation and hence offer no true salvation.

The orthodox view speaks of a heaven to win and a hell to shun, but this view of Being-Itself can throw no light on the future since it has no personal god

and can find nothing higher than an impersonal principle of logos or reason, with which man could commune in an after life.

While the Bible has much to say about heaven and a resurrection body, still it makes it clear that God himself—and heaven too—exist in another dimension from that known to man. Tillich and these men have failed to consider the evidences, both in science and Scripture, for the another dimension—one which may be of such a nature as to even interpenetrate ours. The Bible was written for men of all ages and we cannot expect it to speak in our scientific terms, but at the same time it does clearly require another dimension than that of empirical materialism when it speaks of angels who can appear and disappear, miracles which can occur instantly, a resurrection body of our Lord which can come through closed doors, and a soul in man which is invisible and departs from the body at death to dwell forever and ever either in heaven or hell.

In conclusion we must say that the god of Tillich and Robinson's *Honest To God* is entirely unsatisfactory philosophically, theologically and credally, while the triune god of the Bible is the answer to man's existential needs and philosophically theologically, and credally satisfactory. Only the triune god can be the object of enlightened faith.

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#### FOOTNOTES

1. Robinson, John A. T., *Honest To God*, London: S.C.M. Press, 1963, p. 7-8.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
4. Tillich, Paul, *The Courage To Be*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952, p. 182.
5. Tillich, Paul, *The Shaking of The Foundations*, London: S.C.M. Press, 1949, p. 63f.
6. Tillich, Paul, *Systematic Theology*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1951, Vol. I, 172.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 248.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 235.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 235.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 205.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 169; cf. *Protestant Era*, London: Nisbet & Co., 1951, p. 69-70; 125; 134ff.
12. Tillich, Paul, *The Protestant Era*, p. 135f.; cf. p. 105ff.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 105ff.
14. Tillich, Paul *The Courage To Be*, p. 181.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 40; cf., *Systematic Theology*, p. 56.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
17. Otto, Rudolph, *The Idea of The Holy*, London: Oxford University Press, 1952, p. 108, 112.
18. Tillich Paul, *Systematic Theology*, p. 251.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 251.
20. Tillich, Paul, *Love, Power and Justice*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1954, p. 101.
21. Tillich, Paul, *Systematic Theology*, p. 172.
22. Tillich, Paul, *Theology of Culture*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1959.
23. Mansel, Henry L., *The Limits of Religious Thought*, London: John Murray, 1958.
24. Hodge, Charles, *Systematic Theology* Vol. I. p. 335.
25. Bavinck, Herman, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, Kampen: Kok, 1928, Vol. II, p. 23.
26. Tillich, Paul, *Theology of Culture*, p. 83.
27. Robinson, John A. T., *Honest To God*, p. 11.
28. Tillich, Paul, *The Courage To Be*, p. 181; 187.
29. Tillich, Paul, *The Courage To Be*, p. 40.