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5. Paul Tillich

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5. Paul Tillich

Abstract

Paul Tillich (1886) left his native Germany because of the Nazis about the same time as Karl Barth, but Tillich came to the United States and became a faculty member of Union Theological Seminary, New York. He had spent World War I as a Lutheran chaplain in the German trenches and came out of it looking for something better than the theology that could not explain or help the trench soldier.

His resulting work, primarily expounded since his adoption of English, has led some to proclaim him as the Protestant theologian of our time. Others have branded him heretical. This situation is quite pleasing to him since he thinks of himself as living on the boundary between either/or. What he calls the Protestant principle emphasizes his refusal to idealize or idolatry either side of the boundary. This principle rejects any effort to replace God with sacrament, creed, or even church, because God makes possible both sides of the boundary. God invests each side with power, with being, and thus God is the "ground of being" and the source of power. Therefore, to insist that one choose either science or religion, reason or revelation, objectivity or subjectivity, dogma or feeling is, on the one hand, to reject God and, on the other, to replace God. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Paul Tillich, Chaplain, Union Theological Seminary, Protestant

Disciplines

History of Christianity | Religion | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion

Comments

This is a part of [Section XXIII: Theological Meaning](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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5. Paul Tillich

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His resulting work, primarily expounded since his adoption of English, has led some to proclaim him as the Protestant theologian of our time. Others have branded him heretical. This situation is quite pleasing to him since he thinks of himself as living on the boundary between either/or. What he calls the Protestant principle emphasizes his refusal to idealize or idolatry either side of the boundary. This principle rejects any effort to replace God with sacrament, creed, or even church, because God makes possible both sides of the boundary. God invests each side with power, with being, and thus God is the "ground of being" and the source of power. Therefore, to insist that one choose either science or religion, reason or revelation, objectivity or subjectivity, dogma or feeling is, on the one hand, to reject God and, on the other, to replace God.

In contrast with Aristotle's designation of man as a political animal, Tillich asserts that man is essentially a religious being. His religiousness is manifest in what Tillich terms man's ultimate concern. This concern is the one unifying source of all man's apparently diversified activities. No action is from other than this source. Even his attempt to escape it posits and assumes it. Christianity is the effort to realize this concern most fully and to respond most freely to its source, God. However, when the church avoids or ignores this concern by assuming temporary answers to be eternal or by formalizing a past response as though it were the only true response, then man may ignore the church to express and to fulfill his concern elsewhere. In this case, Christianity becomes simply an ornament on the Christmas tree, a decoration for

* Martin Buber, Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation between Religion and Philosophy (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952), pp. 48-58. Used with permission.

civilization, a wall design. To a degree, Tillich finds this already happening, so that at times he concludes the most important religious movements are taking place outside the church. The modern prophet is the scientist, and the so-called secular world is more religious than the so-called sacred church. Needless to say, these conclusions have not always made him popular among the churches.

Meaning or truth then are not found by a decision for either one thing or another, but by a searching in depth of both. For within all things is God, the ground of their being and the source of their power. At special times, each of which Tillich calls a kairos, God is most clearly evident. At these times, the concreteness of the world becomes transparent to its source of being who both limits its function and also gives it freedom to be as He wills. All of man's activity and all the things of the world have this dual character of concreteness and transparency. To emphasize the concreteness of the world is to make God a thing among other things. To emphasize the transparency of the world makes the creation an illusion. Some things are better able to maintain this duality in balance than others. These we call sacraments. Some persons too evidence this balanced duality better than others. The greatest of these is Jesus the Christ, who would be crucified rather than replace God in the eyes of man and who is resurrected to keep God before the eyes of man.

Even radical doubt about God has this duality. Its concreteness is its seriousness and its transparency is its assumption of that which is doubted. "God is dead." This expresses the seriousness of radical doubt. For Tillich this expresses the ultimate concern of our time, the concern with the problem of meaning in the midst of meaninglessness. Real atheism is to deny the seriousness of this concern which at the same time is to deny God's share in the present situation. God is within the concern and within the situation and not outside either. Thus, the search for meaning is a search in depth.

In the selection which follows, Tillich relates reason and revelation, science and history, experiential and experimental knowledge in his characteristic fashion which both limits and frees them, which both takes them seriously in their concreteness and also looks through them to their ground and source of being, God.

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