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RELIGION AND ULTIMATE CONCERN

AN ENCOUNTER WITH PAUL TILLICH'S THEOLOGY

Louis Midgley

Beginning a series on contemporary theologians, this essay examines some of the central ideas of the foremost Protestant thinker of our time. Louis Midgley is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Brigham Young University; he has published essays on Tillich's political theology in the Western Political Quarterly.

Paul Tillich,¹ the well-known German-American Protestant philosophical theologian, died on October 23, 1965, at the age of seventy-nine. I experienced a deep sense of personal loss upon hearing of his death. The man with whose ideas I have been jousting for the past half dozen years was suddenly gone. He has left a truly impressive legacy. He was honest, intellectually able, and enormously learned; his writing was powerful and convincing. He was the author of thirty-five books and nearly four hundred additional essays. The literature on his thought is a remarkable witness to both the extent of his influence and the power of his intellect; it now numbers some four hundred and eighty books and articles and some seventy-three dissertations and it grows by the day.

His influence, equal almost to his reputation, has become pervasive; he has had an impact far beyond strictly theological circles in such varied areas as philosophy, the arts (especially the visual arts),

sociology, psychotherapy, and politics. I would estimate that at least half of his writings are political or bear in some way on questions of interest to the political philosopher. This accounts for my own initial interest in his thought. His contribution to political philosophy is at least as substantial as that of any contemporary political scientist. It is possible to gauge the extent of his impact on the intellectual world both by the size and variety of the critical literature devoted to him — since 1960 ten books have appeared in English on his thought — and by the fact that his books have sold, in English alone, over three quarters of a million copies. And Tillich is anything but easy reading.

It is, of course, possible to see in Tillich's writings any number of more or less isolated, brilliant, and useful insights and concepts. This is one reason for his vast popularity. But he was above all a systematic thinker. His writings were all part of an interdependent whole. "It always has been impossible for me to think theologically in any other than a systematic way. The smallest problem, if taken seriously and radically, drove me to all other problems and to the anticipation of a whole in which they could find their solution" (ST, I, p. vii.). To take Tillich seriously is to be confronted by his impressive theological system. One reason for my having undertaken a study of his thought has been a curiosity about this system. Actually his theology represents, at a number of crucial points, a total denial of Mormon theology. And, in many ways, Tillich made explicit some positions that are only hinted at by other theologians. He was always radical in the sense that he strove to see the implications inherent within various kinds of theological commitments. The lines are, therefore, much more clearly and sharply drawn between Tillich and Mormon theology than with most other theologians. One of my purposes here is to indicate the extent to which Mormon and Tillichian theology are in opposition to each

¹ References to Tillich's books will follow parenthetically in the body of the essay and will employ the following abbreviations:

- (CTB) *The Courage To Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952)
 (CEWR) *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963)
 (DF) *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper, 1957)
 (IH) *The Interpretation of History* (New York: Scribner, 1936)
 (LPJ) *Love, Power and Justice* (New York: Oxford, 1954)
 (PE) *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948)
 (ST) *Systematic Theology*, 3 Vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951, 1957, 1963)
 (TC) *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford, 1959)
 (TPT) *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, ed. C. Kegley & R. Bretall (New York: Macmillan, 1956)
 (UC) *Ultimate Concern: Tillich in Dialogue* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965)

other and to probe some of the underlying reasons for whatever opposition there may be. I see no reason why Mormons should not take seriously whatever challenge he represents and insights he may have had. Tillich is certainly a worthy partner in a Mormon-Protestant dialogue.

I

Tillich always sought to defend the fundamental truths of religion from enemies that he felt were assailing it from two opposite directions. First, he wished to preserve genuine religion from the threat of the secularization stemming from scientific humanism. But he was also passionately opposed to any semblance of literalism in the interpretation of religious language. Vast numbers of educated people reject, for example, what they consider to be the absurdity of the resurrection story, especially when it is taken as a report about something that actually happened to someone called Jesus. However, many of these same people sense the emptiness of the world without some beliefs that make life appear meaningful. Tillich spoke to these "thinking and doubting people," as he called them. He "insisted that we cannot get rid of the symbols and myths like the resurrection story but must interpret them in a nonliteralistic way. Otherwise, of course, they would be meaningless for all time" (UC, p. 190). He had, for example, no objection at all to the activities of the "great critics since the Enlightenment, and especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries," who have undercut traditional religious beliefs. "After these dangerous people, these courageous people, have done their job and have undercut and destroyed the primitivism of religious literalism, I try to recreate the old realities on another basis" (UC, p. 192). His attention was directed to

. . . those people who are in doubt or estrangement or opposition to everything ecclesiastical and religious, including Christianity. And I have to speak to them. My work is with those who ask questions, and for them I am here. *For the others, who do not, I have the great problem of tact.* Of course, I cannot avoid speaking to them because of a fear of becoming a stumbling block for *primitive believers*. When I am preaching a sermon — and then I am quite aware of what I'm doing — I speak to people who are unshaken in their beliefs and in the acceptance of symbols, in a language which will not undermine their belief. And to those who are actually in a situation of doubt and are even being torn to pieces by it, I hope to speak in such a way that the reasons for their doubts and other stumbling blocks are taken away. On this basis I speak to a third group, one which has gone through these two stages and is now able again to hear the full

power of the message, freed from old difficulties. I can speak to those people, and they are able to understand me, even when I use the old symbols, *because they know that I do not mean them in a literal sense.* (UC, p. 191; italics supplied)

I will attempt to show in this essay that there is an unbridgeable gulf between Tillich and Mormonism on the most fundamental theological issues. Though he made no particular effort to hide his views from what he called “primitive believers,” they have not always realized just how radical he was and have therefore failed to see the full implications of his arguments. One purpose of this essay is therefore expository; I wish to indicate a number of areas in which there is potential agreement between Mormon and Tillichian theology and then to show the profound challenge he presents to Mormonism and the dangers inherent in not taking him seriously. I am interested not only in showing the extent of the challenge Tillich represents to Mormon beliefs, but also in replying to his arguments at what I feel are the most crucial points. We will first look at his concept of “religion” and this will introduce his theological system as it centers on the concept of God.

Tillich made a sophisticated attempt to transform the word “religion” into a genuinely useful concept. He described “religion” as man’s concern about the meaning of life; hence, religion is man’s ultimate concern. Every individual has some concern that is for him ultimate; therefore, everyone is “religious.” Individuals may have as their “gods” things like success, money, sex, justice, security, fame, political or physical power, intellectual or artistic achievement — anything can become a god for man because, Tillich felt, “whatever concerns a man ultimately becomes god for him” (ST, I, p. 211). Likewise, groups have their concerns and therefore their gods. The life of groups, such as political parties, social clubs, business groups and churches, to name only some of the most obvious possibilities, depends upon and expresses some ultimate concern and, therefore, has a religious dimension. Tillich always sought to identify the religious dimension, the style, within every department of human culture. He considered communism, nationalism, and liberal humanism as “world religions” because they are bearers of ultimate concerns that differ only in content from those movements more commonly known as religions.

There is really nothing in Tillich’s description of “religion” as man’s ultimate concern that should be difficult for the Mormon to accept. Tillich’s development of this theme has much to recommend it. And the idea that whatever is one’s ultimate concern is one’s god

is fully scriptural. For example, the concept can be found in both the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants:

And their hearts are upon their treasures; wherefore, *their treasure is their God*. And behold, their treasure shall perish with them also. (2 Nephi 9:30; italics supplied)

They seek not the Lord to establish his righteousness, but every man walketh in his own way, and after his own God, whose image is in the likeness of the world, and whose substance is that of an idol, which waxeth old and shall perish in Babylon, even Babylon the great, which shall perish. (Doctrine and Covenants 1:16)

All aspects of culture, including especially the political, Tillich argued, have a religious dimension, and "religion means 'being ultimately concerned'" (TPT, p. 347).² He expressed the relationship between culture and religion in a formula: "religion is the substance of culture, culture is the form of religion" (TC, p. 42).³ More fully, he argued that: "Religion as ultimate concern is the meaning-giving substance of culture, and culture is the totality of forms in which the concern of religion expresses itself" (TC, p. 42). This formulation certainly does not suffer from a lack of breadth.

Now what is it that actually concerns man ultimately? Men are obviously concerned with many different things, but one concern may so dominate a man, a group, a state, a culture, as to become an "ultimate" concern and the object of such concern functions as a god. But Tillich goes much further; ultimate concern is ubiquitous: "no human mind is entirely without an ultimate concern and some practical and theoretical expression of it" (TPT, p. 347).⁴ Why is it necessary to argue that everyone is religious? He seems to have insisted that everyone has some ultimate concern and is, therefore, religious in order to argue that the important question is not whether one should or should not have a religion, for it is impossible to avoid being religious, but whether one has achieved the proper religious expression. Now Tillich is able to make everyone religious by simply defining them as such; his assertion that all men have an ultimate concern is merely formally true. This suggests some difficulties in his thought which I do not wish to pursue; others have already done so. Instead I will try to show why he felt it necessary to insist on the ubiquity of religion, that is, that man is a *homo religiosus*. Once Tillich is able to establish that all men are religious, that is, ultimately concerned, he then argues for one manifestation of religion over all others: he tries to show us what ought to be the object of our

² Cf. PE, p. xv.

³ Cf. PE, p. 57; IH, p. 50.

⁴ ST, III, p. 130; TC, p. 41; UC, p. 27; ST, II, p. 9.

ultimate concern. The Mormon scriptures which I have already quoted employ a similar strategy. This is certainly not a way of saying that religion, or ultimate concern, is always good, beautiful and true, as some seem to believe, but, just the opposite, that man's concerns usually constitute idolatry and false religion. Here again is a point at which I believe the Mormon can agree with Tillich; both insist that the concept of religion must be supported by a norm that will make possible the distinction between the true and the false, the good and the evil, in man's religious concerns. The point then is not to have just any old ultimate concern, but the proper one. Tillich was at his very best when he talked about the evil potentials of a religious vacuum. I can see no real reason why a Mormon could not accept much of his description of the dynamics of "religion." When one's concerns begin to slacken, as sometimes happens, when one's "gods" begin to die, emptiness develops and into this religious vacuum pour new gods (or demons!). From this simple insight, Tillich developed concepts that he used to interpret almost every event in human history. He offered this insight to the psychotherapist, who sometimes accepted the idea that emotional difficulties can stem from false or conflicting ultimate concerns; he also employed it to explain the activities of groups and even entire cultures — here he got involved in sociology, politics, the philosophy of history, the visual arts, and church history. Behind almost everything that he wrote is the idea that culture has a religious dimension and that everything man does is an expression of his ultimate concern. His life was devoted to the ruthless criticism of what he identified as false religion.

Perhaps Tillich's most elaborate attempt to clarify the concept of ultimate concern is found in the following passage:

Man is ultimately concerned about his being and meaning. "To be or not to be" in *this* sense is a matter of ultimate, unconditional, total, and infinite concern. Man is infinitely concerned about the infinity to which he belongs, from which he is separated, and for which he is longing. Man is totally concerned about the totality which is his true being and which is disrupted in time and space. Man is unconditionally concerned about that which conditions his being beyond all the conditions in him and around him. Man is ultimately concerned about that which determines his ultimate destiny beyond all preliminary necessities and accidents. (ST, I, p. 14) ⁵

This is a difficult passage; however, it deserves careful attention and full criticism. This it has received. One writer has said, in commenting upon the preceding passage:

⁵ See also ST, III, p. 287; TC, p. 40.

Professor Tillich slides from man's being "infinitely concerned" to the object of his concern, "the infinity to which he belongs"; and there are other comparable slides from being "unconditionally concerned" to "that which conditions his being beyond all conditions". . . . After one notices that the adverb modifying 'concerned' generates the content of the concern, one wonders why Professor Tillich limited himself to man's ultimate, unconditional, total, and infinite concerns. Why not man's underlying concern, or his perpetual concern, or his formal concern, or his everlasting concern, to suggest only a few of the appropriately weighty possibilities, before going on to man's happiest concern, or his strangest concern. . . . One can take any of these possibilities and produce such sentences as "Man is perpetually concerned with that which perpetuates his perpetuity". . . .⁶

"'Ultimate,' 'unconditional,' 'total' and 'infinite' are normative terms. They are prospectively useful in measuring, or qualifying, or rating; but they must measure, qualify, or rate something."⁷ Some serious questions are raised when Tillich introduces the norm, that is, when he attempts to indicate what ought to concern man ultimately. Up to this point, I feel that Mormon and Tillichian theology are quite congenial.

By giving the word "ultimate" the meaning of "most important," "dominant," or "controlling," it should be possible to identify what Tillich would call the "god (s)" of various individuals, groups, and nations, even entire cultures. But he wished to do more than merely identify various manifestations of religion; he wished to assess their validity. The concept of ultimate concern contains two distinct elements: 1. Concern should be ultimate. This seems to be an assertion that there should be an abundance of concern, or to put it more accurately, if not more precisely, man should be ultimately concerned. 2. But ultimately concerned about what? Here we find out what the norm is for ultimate concern. Tillich's answer: Man is not really ultimately concerned unless he is actually concerned about *the Ultimate*. This raises two important questions: (1) What is the Ultimate? and (2) How do we come to know and be concerned about it?

II

At the level of mere description, Tillich's concept of religion as man's ultimate concern is, I believe, a genuinely useful concept. The difficulty arises when his norm is considered. Tillich's real aim was to criticize false religion in the name of what he thought was the

⁶ E. Sprague, "On Professor Tillich's Ontological Question," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, II (1962), p. 86.

⁷ *Ibid.*

God of true religion. He emphatically denied that God *exists*, for only finite things exist. This was his way of saying that God is not a finite thing; however, God is real, or to follow Tillich's formulation, God is reality-itself or being-itself, the power of being in all finite existing things. The Ultimate, therefore, does not exist and no merely existing thing is truly Ultimate. His writings are thus full of references to an Ultimate, Unconditional, Absolute, Infinite, ground and power and abyss of all being, meaning and value. God is not merely a finite "thing," but the ground or power that things must have in order to be; God is the is-ness in everything that is.

Events, persons, places — anything — may function as symbols which point to the truly Ultimate. One can speak of the Ultimate only because symbols point to it. Statements about God are thus symbolic. But what of statements about statements about God? Tillich admitted that "the statement that everything we say about God is symbolic . . . itself it is not symbolic" (ST, II, p. 9). If it is not symbolic, what is it? Was it intended to be a factually true assertion? As an assertion about how people do in fact speak about God, it is clearly false. Proof of this is the fact that Tillich strongly opposed those who make non-symbolic statements about God or who interpret religious symbols literally. For example, Mormons employ some language about God that they believe is literally true and, therefore, not merely symbolic. They believe and their scriptures assert, for example, that God is *a* finite being with a spatio-temporal existence. This makes a Mormon deity merely a finite, existing "thing" in Tillich's language. What he always maintained was that such a God was not God at all but merely *a* "god" and, therefore, an idol or perhaps even a demon. It should be clear that what Mormons say about God will fly in the face of Tillich's "God"; the Mormon deities are merely, in Tillich's language, "gods" and not genuine objects of ultimate concern. Now if God is as Tillich claims, Mormons are grossly idolatrous. This represents the radical challenge of his theology.

The concept of religion as concern is not difficult to accept; it is a genuinely useful idea. Whatever is the highest, most complete concern is god for man — "whatever concerns a man ultimately becomes god for him. . ." (ST, I, p. 211). But Tillich was not fully satisfied with this formulation. He insisted that no ultimate concern is ultimately ultimate unless it is ultimate concern about the Ultimate. Now just how is it possible to discriminate between an ultimate concern that is ultimately ultimate and one that is not really ultimately ultimate because it is not ultimately about the

Ultimate? This is a serious question. If we could get hold of a thing called the "ultimate," the matter could be settled. But the Ultimate, Tillich constantly said, is *no-thing*, and one never knows it directly but only through some vehicle — some preliminary, concrete concern. How is one to determine which everyday, mundane, concrete, preliminary concern is really revealing the Ultimate? This question points to a fundamental difficulty in Tillich's theology, for, as I will attempt to show, the very nature of the position he advanced precluded his giving a nonevasive and unequivocal answer.

Tillich maintained that there is risk involved in any ultimate concern. The risk is genuine; there is the constant possibility of idolatry — the affirmation of something which is not ultimate as the Ultimate. The "risk" is generated by the abundance of everyday, mundane, preliminary concerns that crowd out and swallow up genuine concern for the Ultimate or that assume the character of ultimacy themselves. It is quite possible to be concerned about something less than the Ultimate; this, in fact, is the tragic fate of mankind. It is impossible to be directly concerned about the Ultimate, for the Ultimate is only encountered through some particular, finite, concrete object or event, which functions as a symbol of the Ultimate. Thus "it is impossible to be concerned about something which cannot be encountered concretely. . . . The more concrete a thing is, the more the possible concern about it" (ST, I, p. 211).

Tillich actually made three rather different assertions about concern: (1) Man is ultimately concerned about the Ultimate, *i.e.*, being-itself, or in theological language, God, for God "is the name for that which concerns man ultimately"; (2) Man can be concerned only about something that is actually concrete; (3) But no concrete thing is ultimately Ultimate.⁸ The Ultimate with which man is ultimately concerned is only revealed by concrete things which function as self-negating symbols of the Ultimate. Unfortunately man tends to ascribe to symbols an absolute validity and to confuse them with the Ultimate which they should symbolize. A further risk is that one may "affirm a wrong symbol of ultimate concern, a symbol which does not really express ultimacy" (ST, II, p. 116).

Concrete *things* that serve as symbols of the divine take on what he called "holiness." "The holy is the *quality* of that which concerns man ultimately. Only that which is holy can give man ultimate concern, and only that which gives man ultimate concern has the quality of holiness" (ST, I, p. 215). But there is a definite risk involved in affirming the holiness of any *thing*. It is true that "every-

⁸ See W. L. Rowe, "The Meaning of 'God' in Tillich's Theology," *Journal of Religion*, XLII (1962), pp. 274ff., especially p. 276.

thing secular can enter the realm of the holy (ST, I, p. 221),⁹ but the "holy" can also be profanized or secularized, with disastrous results. "Everything secular is implicitly related to the holy. It can become the bearer of the holy. The divine can become manifest in it" (ST, I, p. 218).¹⁰ That which is really "holy" is embodied in holy "objects" and is encountered in no other way. There is only the barest manifestation of that which is genuinely Ultimate, of the truly holy, within human history, and man is constantly tempted to confuse the holy with that which points to it. The struggle against temptation is manifest at all levels of personal existence; it is the struggle between true and false religion. The basis of Tillich's criticism of false, demonic religion is what he calls the "Protestant principle," *i.e.*, the rejection of all attempts to identify the holy itself with some finite thing or event, with a holy "object." Nationalism, for example, is often, though not necessarily, a domestic distortion of true religion. The nation may be holy, *i.e.*, an "object" of genuine concern; but it may also constitute an idol. The nation, or some other such entity, may actually point to the Ultimate. Holy "objects," such as buildings, persons, events or nations, are simply the available vehicles through which concern for the Ultimate is expressed. "A nation which looks upon itself as holy is correct in so far as everything can become a vehicle of man's ultimate concern, but the nation is incorrect in so far as it considers itself to be inherently holy" (ST, I, p. 216).¹¹ But how is it possible to distinguish between the genuine pointer and the false article? This question is crucial for Tillich's theology.

By what standard can religion be judged? Religion, *i.e.*, a faith, an ultimate concern, a set of symbols, he argued, "is true if it adequately expresses an ultimate concern" or, put in a slightly different way, religion is true "if its content is really ultimate" (DF, p. 96).¹² The term "adequacy" refers to the power a symbol should have to express something, to create action and communication. Now this is certainly "not an exact criterion in any scientific sense. but it is a *pragmatic* one that can be applied rather easily to the past with its stream of obviously dead symbols" (DF, p. 97). Unfortunately it is much more difficult to apply it to the present, because one can never be sure that a symbol is actually dead. Tillich recently expressed this argument in more precise terms: "If one asks about the criteria of religious symbols we must state generally that the

⁹ Cf. ST, III, pp. 87ff.

¹⁰ Cf. DF, p. 38; TC, p. 59; PE, p. 123.

¹¹ Cf. DF, pp. 10ff; PE, p. 180; CEWR, pp. 7ff., 12ff.

¹² Cf. ST, I, p. 244; TC, p. 66.

measure of their validity is their adequacy to the religious experience they express. This is the basic criterion of all symbols. One can call it their 'authenticity.' Nonauthentic are religious symbols which have lost their experiential basis. . . ."¹³

But there is another criterion for the *truth* of symbols. Even if the symbol is still alive, it might not be pointing to that which is really Ultimate. For example, the symbols of the nation may be alive, as they were in Germany under the National Socialists, and yet demonic. "The criterion of authenticity is valid but not sufficient. It does not answer the question of the amount of truth a symbol possesses. The term 'truth' in this context means the degree to which it reaches the referent of all religious symbols."¹⁴ The symbol must, by its self-negating quality and by its transparency, point to the referent for which it stands. Any confusion between the symbol and that to which it is supposed to point reflects negatively on its adequacy as a symbol. The measure of the truth of a symbol is the measure of its self-negation. "That symbol is most adequate which expresses not only the ultimate but also its own lack of ultimacy" (DF, p. 97). This, of course, is a restatement of the important question: How can one measure the adequacy of a symbol to negate itself and at the same time point beyond itself? The "Protestant principle" itself needs criteria before it can be applied. As it stands, Tillich did not provide any non-pragmatic method of determining the truth of symbols, that is, whether symbols are genuinely self-negating. Nor was he able to specify how the self-negating quality of symbols could be ascertained in a concrete situation.

The chief difficulty in Tillich's system was his inability to provide tests by which it might be possible to discriminate between the demonic and the divine. This difficulty stems directly from his dogmatic assumption that God is nothing, *i.e.*, literally *no-thing*, that God is not *a* being that exists. Statements about God were for him entirely symbolic. The only non-symbolic and valid literal statement about God is that God is being-itself. This statement seems to be literal in the sense that the word "God" is the exact and complete equivalent of "being-itself." But what is being-itself? What can be said about it? At one point Tillich seemed to say that there are some equivalents or exact synonyms. Thus it would be possible to substitute "power of being," "ground of being" and other such phrases for "being-itself" (See, *e.g.*, ST, I, p. 235ff.). But he also insisted that "every assertion about being-itself is either metaphorical or symbolic"

¹³ Tillich, "The Meaning and Justification of Religious Symbols," in *Religious Experience and Truth*, ed. S. Hook (New York: New York University Press, 1961), p. 10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* See also DF, p. 197; TC, p. 29.

(CTB, p. 179). Sometimes he argued that “power of being” and “ground of being” are “symbolic notions, in so far as they use elements of being (power, cause) in order to circumscribe being-itself” (TPT, p. 335). Elsewhere he held that these circumscribing phrases are metaphorical (LPJ, p. 37f). If they are symbols, it would seem that we have no conscious choice in their use. They are simply “born out of a definite encounter with reality and they last so long as this encounter does, then they die or become transformed into something else.”¹⁵ But metaphors are perhaps consciously employed to “communicate one point of analogy between the proper meaning of the metaphor and that to which it is ‘transferred’ (*metapherein*). Because of this point of analogy, the choice of the right metaphor can be decisive for the solution of a whole series of problems.”¹⁶ Finally, one can give to is-ness “metaphoric names, like ‘being-itself’ or ‘ultimate reality’ or ‘ultimate concern’ (in the sense of that about which one is ultimately concerned). Such names are not names of a being but quality of being.”¹⁷ Religious symbols point to the quality of is-ness that is named by divine names. Apparently the circumscribing phrases can be either metaphors or symbols or both, depending upon whether they are used in conceptual thought (either theological or philosophical) or more directly in the religious life of man.

“God is being-itself or the absolute” (ST, I, p. 239); “God is the name for that which concerns man ultimately” (ST, I, p. 211; ST, III, p. 287; TC, p. 40). There is something curious about all this talk about names. Gilbert Ryle has argued that assertions like “Fido is a dog” provide no information about any actual dog, except that, whatever it is, *if it actually is*, its name is Fido.¹⁸ To be genuinely informative one must do something more than merely name — one must describe; one must assert something that is at least potentially false or true. Tillich most certainly wished to be informative — that being the purpose of his theology. He explicitly rejected the possibility that the fundamental answer to the question “What is being-itself?” was merely a tautology (See, e.g., ST, I, p. 102, 164). It appears to me, however, that the word “God” for Tillich merely denoted or named is-ness or being-itself.

If Tillich’s one literal statement about God was merely a name or denotation, as it appears to me to be, nothing whatever at all

¹⁵ Tillich, “Dimensions, Levels, and the Unity of Life,” *Kenyon Alumni Bulletin*, XVII (1959), p. 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Tillich in Hook, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

¹⁸ G. Ryle, “The Theory of Meaning,” in *British Philosophy at Mid-Century*, ed. C. A. Mace (New York, 1957), pp. 247ff.

follows from the assertion, other than the fact that this is the way he came to use some words. No information, other than the fact of a particular linguistic convention, is provided by naming. Using a proper name is not committing oneself to any further informative assertion whatever. Proper names are appellations and not otherwise cognitively informative (and descriptions are likewise not merely appellations). Names appear to be arbitrary bestowals that convey nothing at all other than the decision to name something with a certain name. To ask for the meaning of words like "being-itself" or "God" is not to ask for a name but for an assertion that is somehow true.

If it is to be used meaningfully, the word "God" must have a referent. Without knowing the intended referent for the name "God," one cannot possibly know the *meaning* of the norm Tillich proposed for judging man's religious concerns. Without knowing God, the norm lacks any content. *Anything* can be a god, but not God. How can the referent be reached? "To what does a religious symbol refer, one asks? How can it be reached? And if it can be reached by symbols only, how can we know that something is reached at all?"¹⁹ Tillich knew that this question had to be answered. "Is there a nonsymbolic statement about the referent of religious symbols? If this question could not be answered affirmatively the necessity of symbolic language for religion could not be proved and the whole argument would lead into a vicious circle." He struggled to provide an answer. He suggested various methods for answering the question, but he explicitly rejected the application of any kind of inductive methodology: "For it can lead only to a finite part of the universe of finite objects through observation."²⁰ But why should that necessarily disqualify it? Because "nothing finite, no part of the universe of finite relations can be the referent of religious symbols, and, therefore, no inductive method can reach it."²¹ Even if the truth of this assertion is granted, and I see no reason at all for granting it, the question still remains: How can God be reached and how can it be demonstrated that something has been reached? Religious symbols do in fact point to what their users feel are, in Tillich's vocabulary, finite objects and existing beings — mere "things" — and he knew it. This is what he called the "tendency toward concreteness," and it is common in all religions (ST, III, p. 283). Why is it then wrong to think of God, as Mormons do, as a particular, personal, existing, concrete, finity reality? The answer: God is being-itself

¹⁹ Tillich in Hook, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, for both quotations.

²¹ *Ibid.*

and not *a* mere being. But this is merely an arbitrary stipulation. One can deny it simply by not equating the word God with the Infinite, Absolute, Unconditional or Ultimate — with is-ness or being-itself.

Tillich argued that the careful analysis of existence uncovers the finitude inherent in reality and thereby implies an Absolute which is beyond the finite. “That to which this analysis leads is the referent in all religious symbols.”²² This is merely another way of saying that man looks beyond the ambiguities of this world. That which is beyond the finite is identified by the metaphors “being,” “power” or “ground.” But is the quality really real; is it a real essence present in some degree in everything or merely a concept or name? He assumed that it was the no-thing he called being-itself that men look for when they look beyond the ambiguities of this world.

What Tillich apparently intended to say was that “everything we say about God *ought to be* symbolic” (TC, p. 40; the italicized words are supplied). Statements about God ought to be symbolic because literal, factual statements transform God into a finite being, a thing, and are therefore false. But how could one show that all possible non-symbolic statements about God are false without having already assumed what God must and must not be in order to be God? This is exactly what Tillich had done. But then in order to prevent his theology from resting on what he fully recognized as a circular and vacuous argument, he was forced to make “an assertion about God which itself is not symbolic” (ST, II, p. 9). God became literally being-itself. Such an assertion cannot rest on self-evidence. It simply is not self-evident except when transformed into an empty tautology. And Tillich was well aware of the weakness of self-evident truths (ST, I, p. 102, 164). But his assertion is not an accurate description of how the word is commonly used.

For Tillich, religious language is always beyond any possible empirical criticism because it is symbolic.²³ The truth (*i.e.*, authenticity, adequacy, divinity) of symbols is the power they have to reveal whatever it is that they symbolize. But one must know what it is that a symbol is intended to reveal before it can be known if it actually succeeds in doing it. Religious symbols, he insisted, should not symbolize any-thing or actual event. The “truth” of a symbol is always truth *for someone* and not about something. The proper posture of man is not credulous acceptance of merely probably

²² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²³ ST, I, pp. 130ff., 238ff.; ST, II, pp. 107-17; DF, pp. 85-9; TC, p. 28.

empirical statements like "Jesus was resurrected" — a proposition he felt was absurd if taken at all literally — but *concern*, concern about one's own being and therefore about that which is the ground of all finite being (s). Faith is not the acceptance of factual propositions about "doubtful historical probabilities"²⁴ like the resurrection of Jesus, even if the probability were high. "If the Christian faith is based even on a 100,000 to 1 probability that Jesus has said or done or suffered this or that; if Christianity is based on possible birth-registers of Nazareth or crime-registers of Pontius Pilate, then it has lost its foundation completely."²⁵ "Faith is the state of being ultimately concerned." Even one who "doubts" has what he called "faith" because he is concerned.

Not only he who is in sin but also he who is in doubt is justified through faith. The situation of doubt, even of doubt about God, need not separate us from God. There is faith in every serious doubt, namely, the faith in the truth as such, even if the only truth we can express is our lack of truth. But if this is experienced in its depth and as an ultimate concern, the divine is present . . . ; he who seriously denies God, affirms him. *Without it I could not have remained a theologian. . . .* Being religious is being unconditionally concerned, whether this concern expresses itself in secular or (in the narrower sense) religious forms. The personal and theological consequences of these ideas for me were immense. Personally, they gave me at the time of their discovery, and always since then, *a strong feeling of relief.* (PE, p. x-xi; italics supplied)

Tillich has never accepted literally doctrines like the resurrection of Jesus. As far back as 1911 he was busy trying to show "how the Christian doctrine might be understood if the non-existence of the historical Jesus should become historically probable." He continued to say, "Even today, I maintain the radicalism of this question over against compromises. . . ." (IH, p. 33f).

III

I have come to view Tillich as a truly tragic figure. His life was dedicated to the pursuit of truth, a kind of truth that really makes some difference to man. His every effort was to find an answer to the question of the meaning of life. The human predicament was always an issue for him. Man's existence, he felt, is ambiguous because it is threatened by sin and guilt; plagued by hopelessness and meaninglessness; finally challenged at its heart by death and personal

²⁴ Tillich, "The Problem of Theological Method," in *Four Existentialist Theologians*, ed. W. Herberg (Garden City: Doubleday, 1958), pp. 255, 246ff.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

extinction. His description of the human predicament strikes me as profound; his recognition of the ambiguities of man's present condition are often overlooked in our own sunny and too easy complacency. But his answer, I feel, was no real answer at all, merely consolation and comfort to the condemned. His inability to do more than offer consolation stems directly from his concept of God and his approach to the meaning of religious language.

The notion of a God who literally speaks to man, a central Mormon belief, was flatly rejected by Tillich. If revelation "is brought down to the level of a conversation between two beings, it is blasphemous and ridiculous. If, however, it is understood as the 'elevation of the heart,' . . . to God, it is a revelatory event" (ST, I, p. 127). The very idea of a God issuing commands and revealing information was in Tillich's eyes simply a picture of a Divine Tyrant. He rejected it as both absurd and demonic, but without giving reasons. The split between Mormon and Tillichian theology is illustrated by noting that Mormons believe that evidence for the existence of God is to be found in testimony concerning the sensory experience of men to whom he has revealed himself. Tillich felt that such a God would be a mere *some-thing* within time and space who might or might not exist. He could not tolerate the idea that a being, about whose existence there was doubt, was God. Such a God could not be the object of concern.

If Tillich was correct in his view of God, there never will be a time and place where the ambiguities of life will be genuinely overcome. The sole consolation is that in God everything is right. Religious language is at times transparent to the ground of being in which the split between things as they actually are and as they really are and therefore ought-to-be is healed. But talk about such things as the resurrection and the Kingdom of God cannot be taken literally. Tillich employed such language in a most powerful manner in his sermons. But he felt that it would be hard to find in them

. . . any directly negative statements, even against literalism. I simply restrain myself in that situation. For instance, the resurrection stories: I do not criticize in my sermons the highly poetic symbolic story of the empty tomb, although I would do so in my theology and have done it in my books. But I speak of what happened to Paul and the other apostles, as Paul describes it in I Corinthians 15. Now that is a preaching method I would recommend for all sermons. (UC, p. 193)

But what if someone is inclined to take the symbolism literally and thereby involve himself in absurdities and idolatry? Tillich replied to this question by saying, "If they do not ask, and I am expected to give aid and comfort in some situation in life, as at funerals, then

there are those great words of Paul, I Corinthians 15. In such moments the question of literalism or nonliteralism does not exist, for we have the power of the word" (UC, p. 194). In a recent sermon entitled "That They May Have Life" Tillich gave his view of the meaning of the gospel in the face of the most final threat — death. "And the Christian message," he said,

. . . contains a "no" to life by pointing in all it says and does to the dying man on Golgotha. "Yes" and "no" to life are united in a unique way when we see in him that God himself participates in this "no" and "yes." "Yes" and "no" united — this means . . . : the "no" is taken into the "yes," death is taken into life, the pain of having to come to [an] end is taken into the joy of being here and now. The meaning of the end is changed. Certainly it will come as the beginning came. But it is also *here*, within the grace of life which created a new beginning. The end and the beginning are here and now. For the eternal [that is, the Ultimate] is here and now. And the experience of its presence makes our last day, like any other day, into something preliminary. If death is accepted by us already, we do not need to wait for it, be it near or far, be it with fear or with contempt. We know what it is because we have accepted it in all its darkness and tragedy. We know that it is the confirmation that we are creatures and that our end belongs to us. *We know that life cannot be prolonged, neither in this nor in some imagined future existence.*

And the question is no longer: What will be after death? But the question will be: Have I taken death into my life? Am I able to have an abundant life just because I have gone and am going through death as Jesus did? Is the ultimate grace of life working in me. And if I don't feel it, the question of life and death may become an ardent desire and may be changed into the prayer, with or without words: Give me strength to take my death into my life.²⁶

Beautiful, powerful language with a bleak, solemn message. No shout of joy there. But this is clearly what Tillich's system entails and we should realize it. My own feeling about his theology can be expressed in the words of Wordsworth:

It moves us not. — Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn

²⁶ Tillich, "That They May Have Life," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, XX (1954), p. 8 (Italics supplied).