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Tillich's "Method of Correlation"

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ONE of the reasons why the thought of Paul Tillich is so impressive and challenging is that it is a *system*, as original and personal in its conception and structure as anything a skilled architect or engineer might plan. And his system, so he tells us in the Introduction to his *Systematic Theology*, is an attempt to use a particular method. Here also the comparison with architecture and engineering holds good, for mastery in those disciplines depends on the ability to exploit to the full a suitable technique of construction; the method chosen must be adequate to meet all the demands which arise out of the task on hand, and should this method prove faulty, no other virtue in design avails anything.

Therefore there is good reason for examining the method which Tillich has chosen in constructing his theological system, since what we think about his method will determine how we view his system as a whole. And, although the system has not yet been published in its entirety, the first three parts of the *Systematic Theology* are now available, together with a number of other writings dealing with different aspects of the system. So we have been given enough to be able to see how his method works out in practice as well as in idea.

I

The method which Tillich uses he calls the "method of correlation," and it has been chosen in order to solve the apologetic problem of "Christianity and the modern mind." It aims at achieving a synthesis between the perennial message of Christianity and the concrete temporal situation in which the message must be received:

It tries to correlate the questions implied in the situation with the answers implied in the message . . . It correlates questions and answers, situation and message, human existence and divine manifestation.¹

By means of this method Tillich hopes to steer between the errors of overcompromising liberalism and of static orthodoxy. Rejecting both "naturalism" and "supranaturalism," he wishes to do justice to the classical Christian belief that revelation is more than man can discover for himself, and yet at the same time recognize the essential element of human receptivity—the way in which revelation finds expression within the conditions of existence. Through the use of the method of correlation he hopes to show how reason and revelation are to be reconciled and a solution to the riddle of existence supplied by religious faith. This reconciling and explanatory work he sees

1. *Systematic Theology* I, p. 8.

as theology's proper task, so that theology is essentially apologetics; and apologetics is "answering theology," the most clear and most satisfying answer to the question man asks in every age: the question, "What is truth?"

Now a method of correlation, in itself, can mean very little. When such a method is used we know that different things are being put in relationship to one another. But whether this activity is either profitable or justifiable we cannot tell until we know enough about the things being correlated to know what relationships can, in fact, exist between them. Astrology, for instance, correlates the fortunes of individuals and the movement of heavenly bodies. But although the method of correlation in astrology has been used down the centuries in order to cast horoscopes, and is still very widely trusted, scientific thought today has no interest in horoscopes because it finds no reason to believe that the pattern of human lives and the pattern of the starry sky are directly related in any way.

Therefore what we want to know about Tillich's "method of correlation" is the relation he supposes to exist between the terms he is correlating. That this presumed relationship is quite basic can be seen if we consider an instance of correlation between a question and an answer. The question, "Why am I feeling this pain?" can appear in correlation with the answer, "You ate too much for dinner," or in correlation with the answer, "Your enemy is using witchcraft to hurt you." Which answer will in fact be taken to be a correlative of the question depends upon the way in which the causes of pain are conceived. The questioner who assumes a relationship of physical effect to physical cause will not consider that he has been answered at all by an assuming a relationship of physical effect to magical cause, and *vice versa*. Every question, in fact, contains presuppositions limiting the possible answers that can be made to it, and we need to know the context in which the question has been asked if we are to reply intelligently to it. It may very well be that we cannot reply to the question at all until it has been rephrased in order to exclude implications which we are not prepared to admit because they "beg the question."

Thus when Tillich proposes to solve the problem of Christianity and the modern mind (or, in more general terms, the problem of "message" and "situation") by the method of correlating "questions" implied in the situation with "answers" implied in the message, this may sound like an excellent piece of apologetic strategy. To produce Christianity as the answer to the questions asked by the modern mind must surely take the ground from under the feet of the unbeliever who argues that Christianity flourished in ages of ignorance but is outmoded today. Yet it should be realized at the same time that this method, which is meant to preserve the integrity of the Christian message, puts the "answer" under the power of the "question." By using this metaphor of question-and-answer Tillich is indicating that the Christian message will be stated solely in terms demanded by the "question" side of his correlation, and this is surely a big price to pay—perhaps too big a one—for an apologetic vantage ground.

For Tillich does not shrink from stating dogmatically that the Christian "answers" derive their meaning from being answers to a particular sort of question:

The answers implied in the event of revelation are meaningful only in so far as they are in correlation with questions concerning the whole of our existence, with existential questions.²

After this declaration, we are prepared for the full explanation of the method that follows:

In using the method of correlation, systematic theology proceeds in the following way: it makes an analysis of the human situation out of which the existential questions arise, and it demonstrates that the symbols used in the Christian message are the answers to these questions.³

Here the notion of the Christian message being given in symbols requires explanation; but the general procedure is plain enough, although how the procedure is justified is not yet apparent. What we need to know is the frame of reference in which the questions concerning existence are set—those all-important questions whose function is to make intelligible the content of the Christian message. This we need to know, because this alone will tell us the context into which the Gospel is to be placed and thus the limits which will be put to the kind of "answer" that it will be allowed to give.

II

In Tillich's system the relation of "situation" to "message" and of "existential question" to "theological answer" reflects the relationship presumed to exist between philosophy and religious faith. Tillich explains that the analysis of the human situation which theology makes in order to produce existential questions is carried out wholly in philosophical terms. He insists that, in making his analysis, the theologian works strictly as a philosopher and does not introduce any theological elements into his analysis; for although his view-point is inevitably influenced by his convictions he will not, on that account, falsify his philosophic vision.⁴ Tillich bases his case for his own particular system of philosophical theology on the fact that all theology must use language and so becomes involved in the thought-forms of a particular age and culture: it cannot exclude "situation".⁵ Yet, when all is said, it is difficult to believe that the Christian theologian can state Christian doctrine only when, putting behind him all he believes as a man of faith, he speaks as a philosopher. Granted that no theology can escape the influence of the contemporary climate of thought, it is still far from evident why "situation" should dominate theology to such a degree that it is able to dictate the kind of theological statements that may be made.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 3-7.

Why is the Christian message not allowed to speak unless spoken to, and then only to reply to questions put to it?

This relationship is described in his *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality*. The synthesis which he there seeks to establish between the two parts of the title of the book is the key to all his thinking. The Christian faith and the philosophic quest belong together; Pascal was wrong, and the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is one and the same God as the God of the philosophers; the philosopher and the theologian seek the same goal and are sustained by the same resources—this is Tillich's explicit thesis. It is not necessarily the conclusion to which his arguments lead. For while in this book, he speaks in terms of a synthesis which shall do justice to both elements, and thus avoids the mistakes of nineteenth-century "liberal" Protestantism, yet his reasoning actually assumes that Christianity must be fitted into the framework of a speculative system. The core of the argument is as follows:

The ultimate concern of the believer is concern about that which really is ultimate and therefore the ground of his being and meaning. He implicitly asks the question of ultimate reality. . . . As a believer, he is not concerned with ontological research; but he is concerned with truth, and this means ultimate reality. . . . Faith includes the ontological question, whether the question is asked explicitly or not.⁶

In this passage the presumed relationship which gives rise to the method of correlation is stated directly, although Tillich's metaphor of question-and-answer once more tends to blur the issue. It is plainly asserted that the Christian believer cannot have a faith which is adequate without taking for the object of his faith, at least by implication, that ultimate reality which the philosopher seeks by means of ontological speculation. In other words, truly to know the true God men must go to the metaphysician and learn of him. The touchstone of truth is in his sole possession.

Thus the synthesis between "biblical religion" and "the search for ultimate reality" (ontology) is for Tillich one where the relation between the two cannot be expressed accurately in a simple "and". This relationship is one in which the first-named element of the synthesis cannot stand alone without the second as a background and principle of interpretation.

If we want to know how Tillich can be so sure that Christianity and philosophy belong together in a final unity, we learn that in so believing he feels himself supported by both his philosophical and his theological conscience. As religion and philosophy belong together, so do reason and revelation. Indeed, reason in the soul of men—reason, that is, in the classical sense of *logos* and not mere "reasoning"—represents the principle of meaning in its fullest extent. It is found in intuitions of the heart, in aesthetic judgements, and in commitments of faith as well as in acts of rational knowledge. Theologically, Tillich insists on the absolute necessity for republishing the *logos* theology of the school of Alexandria, with its

6. *Op. cit.*, p. 59.

union of *gnosis* and *episteme*—mystical and conceptual knowledge.⁷ Philosophically, he champions the Greek “spiritual” conception of reason as against the modern restriction of reason’s task to the finding of means for ends: “The denial of reason in the classical sense is antihuman because it is antidivine.”⁸

It now becomes completely evident why biblical religion is not a way to truth until the “ontological question” is asked. The subordination of religious belief to philosophy has its source in Tillich’s *logos* doctrine. According to his system, revelation figures as a “self-transcending” or “ecstatic” moment in reason where reason, though transcended, is preserved intact, being grasped from “outside” itself only because it is grasped by *its own* depths.⁹ In reason the human and the divine are one, and therefore reason has a more inclusive revelatory function than “revelation,” commonly so-called. In practice, it is true, religion and philosophy seem to be rivals suspicious of each other, yet they each aspire to a final unity, a unity of *theonomy* (or rule of the divine law in its fulness), where man’s rational nature can be reunited with its deeper, hidden self by reaching beyond appearances to the power of being. And philosophy has this advantage over religious faith: it traffics directly with truth. For truth appears recognizably “for someone, namely, for the mind which in the power of the rational word, the *logos*, grasps the level of reality in which the really real ‘dwells.’”¹⁰ The philosopher, striving for truth by means of the cognitive act can, even now, grasp the “really real.” The believer knows reality only through the symbols of his faith.

III

Since the correlation of “situation” and “message” turns out to be a reading of the religious “message” wholly in terms of a philosophical analysis of the “situation,” Tillich’s method cannot be other than a *reduction* of Christian doctrine to make it agree with his ontology. Theology, on this view, becomes a technique of re-interpreting confessional and credal statements so that they can be used to support a theory of the “really real.”

This general conclusion is confirmed when we examine Tillich’s own account of how the method of correlation works. Here, for example, is Tillich’s own presentation of how the nature of God is to be understood:

In respect to content the Christian answers are dependent on the revelatory events in which they appear; in respect to form they are dependent on the structure of the questions which they answer. God is the answer to the question implied in human finitude. This answer cannot be derived from the analysis of existence. However, if the notion of God appears in systematic correlation with the threat of nonbeing which is implied in existence, God must be called

7. *Systematic Theology* I, pp. 153–154, 157.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 72; cf. 157 n.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 113–114.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

the infinite power of being which resists the threat of nonbeing. In classical theology this is being itself.¹¹

God, as the "answer," says Tillich, cannot be derived from the analysis which asks the "question." Yet he declares that being-itself or "the ground of being" is God on the grounds of an analysis of what it means to be finite and to know the difference between existential and essential being. *The question of God*, he says, is the question implied in being, and it is the finitude of being which drives us to the question of God.¹² Thus it seems that God is already in the question, before any answer is given. Again, Tillich claims that the philosophical "questions" give the form of the theological "answers," while their content is derived from religious revelation. But surely to correlate the notion of God with the threat of non-being and discover that He is the infinite power of being to resist non-being is to impart a very definite *content* to the notion of God; and this content derives entirely from the definition of God as being-itself over against the background of finite existence with which being-itself is contrasted.

If, in this example, anything is not clear about the application of the method of correlation it is whether any content at all has been derived from the "answer"—which is, we must remember, an answer provided not directly but by means of symbols. True the word "God" is borrowed from the language of religious faith; but it is an "empty" word, waiting to be given specific content. The theologian using Tillich's method proceeds to give the word content by stating that "God is being-itself or the absolute" and "that he is not God if he is not being-itself." Only here does he speak "directly and properly," and in saying anything beyond this he must speak figuratively and by analogy. Even then, everything he says about God will be *on this basis*, i.e., related ontologically.¹³ And, although the truth of the "symbolical" statements of the Christian message is not supposed to be affected by being interpreted by theology, yet these statements are compelled to witness to a God given in ontological speculation. Consequently, they are allowed no more than that measure of meaning which they receive from being placed within the ontological system.

For instance, we are told that the biblical "symbol" of *the Living God* must be understood to mean that "God lives in so far as he is the ground of life." This symbol is one of those "provided by the ontological elements" found in the system, so that, because these elements have a polar character, the symbols must reflect this character, and the symbol representing the "dynamic" pole must be balanced against a symbol representing the pole of "form." The symbol of *the Living God* must be corrected by a symbol indicating God's perfection and self-preservation. Why? By reason of the fact that although tension between dynamics and form (potentiality and actuality) is characteristic of existence it is transcended in being-itself, together with the polarity we find in all the ontological elements as known

11. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 166.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 239.

in existence. "The polar character of the ontological elements is rooted in the divine life, but the divine life is not subject to this polarity."¹⁴ It cannot be overlooked that the final result is to make the Biblical message that God is the Living God wholly subservient to a theory of being-itself and the elements of being.

The Christian message appears in symbols because Tillich's Absolute,¹⁵ being-itself, cannot be described without recourse to symbolic language. We may say that the Absolute *is*, but to say more defeats the ordinary limits of speech and thought. The system needs revelation as well as reason. It needs answers to supplement its questions. But this does not mean that either "revelation" or "answer" has any independent status apart from "reason" or "question": these are called in to give additional support to the system, much as Plato makes use of myths to round out his philosophy. And the method of correlation assumes that (theologically speaking) revelation has no function but to serve reason in its ontological task, and that the Christian faith exists in order to support, in symbolic form, the analysis of existence made by ontology. For, just as in connection with the method of correlation the really important thing is the presumed relationship believed to justify the possibility of correlation, so the really important thing about the claim that the Christian message operates by means of symbols is the presumed supra-symbolic reality believed to be indicated by the symbols. In other words, before querying whether the Christian message is given in symbols or not, we ought to ask: granted the message comes in symbols, what are these symbols *symbols of*? In Tillich's system Christian symbolic language is taken to be symbolic of philosophical truth which cannot be expressed in the language of conceptual thought, and, when it is expressed, appears as the conclusion of "ecstatic reason."

Now the system demands that the philosopher must "believe" in order to know. That means he must be a theologian, as well as a philosopher, in order to carry out the philosophic task thoroughly. But the belief of the philosopher-theologian is actually laid down by his philosophy. Though as a religious man he may worship God, as a philosopher he knows that no God other than being-itself is worthy to become his ultimate concern. Though as a religious man he may have faith, as a philosopher he knows that the only adequate faith is participation in the power of being-itself through the knowledge that being-itself is the infinite power of being which resists the threat of non-being. Certainly, without the mediation of religious symbols he would not know the meaning of faith, by experiencing the meaning of being *for him*; but on the other hand, the end of his search is the state of "absolute faith," where religious symbols are transcended as far as is possible under the conditions of existence, so that nothing "concrete"

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 242-244.

15. Tillich dislikes the term *the Absolute*, as he dislikes the term *metaphysics*, because of the connotations it has acquired. (See *Systematic Theology*, I, p. 12, and *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, p. 340.) But since he himself uses it ("God is being-itself or the absolute," *Systematic Theology* I, p. 239), there seems no good reason for not preferring it in this connection to the name *God*, which has such strong religious associations.

continues to mediate between the existing self and the power of being which prevents the self from being overwhelmed by non-being.¹⁶

This conclusion is not surprising. If the symbols of the Christian message have meaning only in correlation with existential questions, then, whatever answers these symbols may give, they possess no meaning in themselves. It is existence by itself, and nothing else, which ultimately can answer its own question; for no answer from "outside" is permissible, according to Tillich's stand on "ecstatic naturalism." If the manifestation of the divine can be received only in the light of man's existential situation, then no message can be received unless it speaks of the divinity immanent in that situation. To choose the method of correlation is to declare that the Christian God must fit into the framework which is discovered by analysing existence, and that He is one with the ultimate reality whose nature is declared in the relation of the human self to its world.

IV

There is one relevant matter, however, which has not yet been considered. Sometimes Tillich appears to suggest that the theological "answer" does not stand under the power of the philosophical question:

Symbolically speaking, God answers man's questions, and under the impact of God's answers man asks them. . . . This is a circle which drives man to a point where question and answer are not separated.¹⁷

At first glance this statement might seem to be about the way of working of Tillich's theological method. But of course it is not a statement about method at all and does not in the least affect the entire independence of the philosophical analysis required by the method. It is a statement about the nature of that ultimate reality which Tillich assumes to underlie and justify his method. He goes on to say that the point where question and answer meet is not a point in time but one belonging "to man's essential being, to the unity of his finitude with the infinity in which he was created and from which he is separated."

So when Tillich describes "question" and "answer" as forming a unity he is referring to the *logos* philosophy upon which his system is founded, the philosophy which teaches how man can ask questions about the infinite because he is both essentially one with the infinite and also existentially separated from it. This philosophy includes the faith that philosophy and theology are *essentially* one. But they are *existentially* separated, and so at present the Christian revelation can have meaning only in the light of an existential analysis. Tillich says that there is a point where question and answer are not separated, because of his belief that reason is both human and divine. He believes in the potential divinity in man enabling him to rise above the limitations of finite existence, in which he lives as an exile, to the infinite which is his real home.

16. *The Courage to Be*, pp. 176-180.

17. *Systematic Theology* I, p. 61.

Tillich's "ecstatic naturalism" is a faith in man's innate self-transcendence as the fount of revelation. It is no part of the present analysis to show how this basically Platonic faith in the power of *eros* to transcend existence conflicts with traditional Christian doctrine. But the nature of the faith is not in doubt, being evident not only in the positive assertions of Tillich's system but also in the way Biblical terminology is continually by-passed there for other terms more congenial to his faith. Thus in Tillich's system the Hegelian term *estrangement* stands in place of *sin*, because estrangement is "conquered" by *eros*, i.e., "love as the striving for the reunion of the separated"¹⁸—a view attributed to Paul, yet more obviously derived from the *Symposium*; and the central paradox of the Christian message is declared to be not incarnation, redemption or justification, but the New Being: "the appearance of that which conquers existence under the conditions of existence."¹⁹ "Question" and "answer", therefore, are not separated at the point where it is assumed that the Christian message really means awareness of participation in the power which conquers existential estrangement, the New Being the reality of which cannot be doubted but the historical embodiment of which might (or might not) have been Jesus.²⁰ And in order to come to this point it is obviously necessary to accept, as the indispensable starting-point, not man's encounter with God in Christ but the "ontological shock" which makes man aware of the divine in himself. There is no other way into Tillich's "circle."

Tillich claims that the method of correlation has always been used, consciously or unconsciously, by systematic theologians, and he brings in as a witness the opening sentences of Calvin's *Institutes* concerning man's misery and God's glory.²¹ But the quotation he gives includes the words, "on the other hand, it is plain that no man can arrive at the true knowledge of himself, without having first contemplated the divine character, and then descended to the consideration of his own." This is quite a different "circle" from the one in which Tillich operates, for it founds its analysis of the human situation upon the Christian revelation of God—in this way putting the "question" under the power of the "answer." The "answers implied in divine self-manifestation" here "guide" the questions implied in human existence instead of being "guided" by them.

"The method of correlation explains the contents of the Christian faith through existential questions and theological answers in mutual interdependence,"²²—so runs Tillich's claim. In practice his existential analysis is developed into a self-sufficient ontological system. And to this system the Christian message, symbolically understood, is then accommodated. The latter stands to the former in a relation of complete dependence.

18. *Systematic Theology* II, p. 47. Cf. *Love, Power and Justice*, p. 25.

19. *Systematic Theology* I, p. 57; "Essential God-Manhood has appeared within existence and subjected itself to the conditions of existence without being conquered by them." *Systematic Theology* II, p. 98.

20. *Systematic Theology* II, p. 114.

21. *Systematic Theology* I, p. 63 and n.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 60.