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Tillich's Theory of Religious Symbolism

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IN PAUL TILlich we have a notable contemporary thinker who is aware of the problem of religious language both in regard to its meaning and its verification. He is not prepared in the manner of Karl Barth to appeal to the authority of the biblical revelation as if that appeal alone, at least in an uncritical manner, would solve his problem. He is entirely aware of the limitations of human language when used in a theological context. He is also convinced that there is only one way to avoid the absurdities which a literal use of such language implies. This is a construction of a philosophical theology which will provide a consistent set of principles for the interpretation of such language. It is not sufficient to regard language merely as a system of signs which a human group or groups have decided to use. Of course, there is a sense in which all language is used according to the conventional patterns and forms existing in any particular society or group. This does not mean that language evolved as the result of conscious and deliberate decisions any more than the state came into being as the consequence of a deliberate social contract, as Rousseau taught. There is a natural evolution of language as the result of man's continued intercourse with his environment and the effort to come to terms with it in a manner which would enhance both the security and quality of human life. Yet there is more to it than this, for man's environment elicits from man an awareness of the *unconditioned*. What does this imply for Tillich?

He unites with Aquinas in the thirteenth century and Heidegger in the twentieth in giving the primacy to Being. This is not the most abstract and empty of all concepts, as Hegel declared it to be, when it is conceived of as the power of being, the power to bring into and to sustain in existence. All human thinking is by its very nature ontological in the sense that it seeks to know that which *is*, and by that very fact is driven to become aware of the *unconditioned* as that which constitutes the ground and being of all that is. It is further to be noted that *Being* is the only non-symbolic statement which it is possible for man to make about the *unconditioned*—Being and the power of Being. Difficulties immediately arise because, although religious men have often been prepared to say that no predicates apply to God, they have usually wanted to go on and say much more. What justifies them in saying any more instead of remaining silent before Being unqualified by any human adjectives? Furthermore, how reconcile this language of Being with the radical personalism of the Christian religion, not to mention Judaism, Islam, some forms of Hinduism, and indeed Mahayana Buddhism.

Words, according to Tillich, are not *only* conventional signs. "They are the results of the encounter of the human mind with reality."¹ But what kind of reality does the human mind encounter? God as the unconditioned or Being and the power of Being is not one *object* among other objects, and therefore He cannot be known in the same manner. Tillich, however, is obviously not content to leave the situation there. Although it is improper to speak of the "existence" of God and although the traditional arguments are not logical proofs but testimonies to man's obscure awareness of the unconditioned as defined above, Tillich is, or claims to be, a biblical theologian. For the Bible, God is not only transcendent but in some way present with His people. What can this mean for Tillich? He agrees with Barth concerning "the inability of man to reach God under his own power." Nor can man by virtue of his finitude gaze directly on *Being* as the unconditioned source and ground of all that is. What, then, can man do or know?

He can know the world of finite things, and since these are rooted in Being, his knowledge of them so far as it goes is a knowledge of God, but if this were all, it would be little indeed. In and through the world of finite things, however, man encounters the *holy*. This has an *ecstatic* character in Tillich's special meaning of this term. It is an experience of the *holy* which, though given in experience, nevertheless transcends it and points beyond it.² So far this is in line with what has been said by Rudolf Otto, John Oman, Dorothy Emmet, H. H. Farmer, and quite a few others. Though this implies the presence of the transcendent in the experience of finite man, it also follows from his previous statements about the unconditioned that anything one knows about a finite thing cannot be applied to God. How, then, can we speak about the unconditioned at all? Has It or He any definable character which human language can indicate, if only inadequately?

Here emerges Tillich's special understanding of the nature and role of language. The Bible talks both of God's transcendence and His presence with men. Through nature, historical event, prophetic personality, and the Christ, men become aware of his presence as the ethically holy will impinging upon their lives, and in that experience they become aware of the unconditioned as Being and the power of Being. In this encounter with the holy, religious language and symbols are born. This explains why we must carefully distinguish between signs and symbols if a proper understanding of religion is to be obtained. All signs and symbols point to something beyond themselves. For the sign, however, there is no intrinsic relationship between it and that to which it points. By a different social convention green rather than red might be the sign for stop! The symbol, on the other hand, *participates* in the power of that which it symbolizes. Such symbols are an organic growth. Theology can neither create nor destroy them. They

1. *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), Vol. II, p. 19.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

are the products of an existential encounter between man and the transcendent reality made known through his experience of the holy. Such symbols open up depths of reality which would otherwise remain hidden, while at the same time they make possible levels of experience from which men would likewise be excluded but for the power of these symbols. Theology cannot study God or the unconditioned directly. It can only study the language and the symbols which have emerged from man's encounter with the holy. They participate in it and are charged, as it were, with its power. In studying the symbols, therefore, theology is studying man's genuine knowledge of and acquaintance with the transcendent holy.

What, precisely, are these symbols, how do we recognize an authentic symbol, and by what criteria, if any, are we able to discriminate between different symbols in their degree of more or less appropriateness to the holy God in whom they participate? It is not easy to give a satisfactory answer to these questions without giving a complete sketch or outline of Tillich's systematic theology and its underlying principles. Some acquaintance with this must be assumed and its relevance to our problem of religious language and symbolism must be indicated. Tillich, we believe, is entirely correct in asserting that "original revelation is given to a group through an individual. Revelation can be received originally only in the depths of a personal life, in its struggles, decisions and self-surrender."³ This means that the symbols, which emerge as the result of man's encounter with the holy, spring first of all from a particular individual's awareness of the transcendent, whatever may be the importance of the psychological and sociological factors as determining the "form" of the individual experience. Tillich also agrees with a frequent emphasis of contemporary theologians to the effect that revelation is not, properly speaking, a matter of revealed doctrines. The "Word of God," in the sense of a symbol which participates in that which it symbolizes, accompanies and interprets revelatory situations. Since there are no revealed "doctrines," it follows that theological reflection upon the original symbols of the revelatory act or event does not itself give us *symbols* which participate in the transcendent holy. The problem, therefore, for our study is to isolate the original symbols which belong to the revelatory event and separate them from what may be called the secondary symbols of theological and philosophical reflection. Can this be done? According to Tillich, it can, but only on condition that certain important principles are remembered and recognized. If one asks how human language and action can produce symbols which not only denote but which participate in the "holy" in the Tillichian sense, the answer depends upon our recognition that the term "'Word' can only be made the all-embracing symbol of the divine self-manifestation if the divine 'Word' can be *seen* and *tasted* as well as *heard*."⁴ Emil Brunner has remarked somewhere that the supreme paradox of the New Testament is that the Word has become a *person*! So also

3. *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), Vol. I, p. 127.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

Tillich insists that the Incarnation of the Logos includes the paradox that "the Word has become an object of vision and touch."⁵ This has important consequences for his theory of religious language and symbolism. The symbolism generated by the encounter with the holy includes physical acts and gestures and the use of physical objects as well as certain kinds of language which accompany them. This leads us to the fundamental importance of the sacramental principle for Tillich's whole theology and his theory of symbolism in particular. M. Gerard Siegwalt rightly remarks that "il faut constater que Tillich renoue ici, à travers Luther, avec toute la piété médiévale et ancienne, qui était sacramentale, ou ce que Tillich nomme 'théonome.'⁶ Tillich is well aware of the danger of identifying the "holy" with the sacramental objects and words. This is particularly evident in the Roman Catholic attitude to the physical elements in the Mass (transubstantiation) and its view of the visible, institutional church and priesthood as "holy." "The mere performance of the accepted rites or the mere participation in a sacramental act is considered to have saving power."⁷ Professor H. D. Lewis utters a similar warning concerning the way in which "outward symbols insinuate themselves into the position of real and final instead of representative and transitional bearers of the glory."⁸ In reacting against this, however, Protestantism has been in danger of losing the sacramental principle altogether or interpreting it in too intellectualistic and moralistic a way. Protestantism rejected the Pelagian principle of self-salvation but it has returned in fundamentalist and pietist insistence that salvation depends upon correct doctrine and upon faith understood as involving certain emotional reactions which the believer must artificially create if they do not spontaneously arise within him.

Tillich is evidently feeling his way towards an understanding of the sacramental principle which transcends both the Catholic danger of localizing and imprisoning the holy in the finite as well as the Protestant danger of excessive distrust of the truly sacramental quality of acts, objects, and words. He seems to envisage a theological and practical synthesis on a higher level than current Catholic or Protestant practice in which transcendence and immanence, real presence (Roman and Lutheran), and symbolic presence (Calvin) can be combined satisfactorily.

How does all this bear upon our pattern of religious language, affirmative and negative? What linguistic symbols are significant in Tillich's sense of participation? In addition to the linguistic symbols which accompany the revelatory act, is it legitimate to go a step further and make properly metaphysical statements about God which can be regarded as "true," and what would *truth* mean in this context? It is when he grapples with this question that Tillich seems to create as many difficulties as he solves. We must not,

5. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

6. *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuse* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1961), No. 2, p. 177.

7. *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II, p. 85.

8. H. D. Lewis, *Our Experience of God* (New York: Macmillan 1959), p. 187.

he says, confuse our awareness of the holy and our symbolic representation of it with the God of traditional theism. He charges the exponents of the latter with thinking of God as an object among other objects rather than as the ground of being and meaning. Is this, in fact, a legitimate criticism? Professor C. A. Campbell appears to be making a similar charge when he argues the necessity for passing beyond rational theism (i.e., the theism of traditional Christian theology) to a suprarational theism. Will and thought, literally interpreted, cannot be applied to God in the proper sense of that term without self-contradiction.⁹ Whether traditional theism is open to this charge of ascribing to God human attributes, literally interpreted, is obviously a matter for debate. The Bible is not unaware of the fact that God is incomprehensible, invisible, and spiritual, even though he mysteriously bestows his "presence" upon men. Nor were the fathers oblivious of the transcendence of God and the essential limitations of human language. Aquinas was certainly well aware of the fact that our discursive thought about God reflects inevitably the limitations of finite thought and that we have to think of God in terms of several distinct attributes instead of having an intuition of the divine simplicity.¹⁰ To return, however, to Tillich. The true God is the abyss of the symbolic material which we apply to him. This would appear to involve a purely negative theology in which no human symbols can be properly applied to that which by definition transcends all such symbols. We know how far Dionysius the pseudo-Areopagite was prepared to go in this direction, and how far in turn Aquinas was ready to follow Dionysius. Neither of these two thinkers was content to remain at that point, and neither is Tillich. "On the other hand, we can *speak* of Him only if we apply this symbolic material to Him."¹¹ But why should we speak of him? Even the use of the personal pronoun "him" is a symbol too. We have to speak because man has encountered the "holy." He has apprehended, even if not fully comprehended, the transcendent in his experience. This is so compelling that he cannot avoid the attempt to become articulate, to use language which can in some way express that which he has experienced. If he has to choose between inadequate human language and complete silence, he will choose language even if, in Tillich's terms, it is only a symbolic language which can never do justice to the "abyss." The divine attributes of classical theology and the symbols of his personal activity such as love, wrath, justice, mercy, patience are true as symbols but not in a non-symbolic sense.¹² The word love, which denotes first a human experience, is a true symbol because it participates in the "transcendent holy" of which it is the symbol. In what sense does it participate and of what kind of love are we speaking? The classical eros, the New

9. C. A. Campbell, *On Selfhood and Godhood* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1957), Lecture XV, pp. 307ff.

10. F. C. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1950), Vol. II, Ch. XXXV, pp. 348ff.

11. F. E. Johnson, *Religious Symbolism* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1955), p. 114.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

Testament agape, the Augustinian caritas, or Karl Barth's third love, human love, which is neither eros nor agape in the sense of Nygren's definitions? Or does he mean that all forms of love as experienced by men point beyond themselves to the holy love on which they depend and from which they ultimately derive? What does it mean to say that love is true in a symbolic but not in a non-symbolic way? Is this only another way of saying that love is not to be applied literally to God or that human love is a faint but nevertheless true analogy of the divine love? In other words, what is the truth of a symbol which by its very nature cannot point to a non-symbolic reality? We know that God is *Being* in a non-symbolic sense, according to Tillich and this is the only thing we do know about him in this sense. Yet despite all that he says, does not Being remain essentially an empty concept unless our symbols too are capable of expressing a non-symbolic truth about the transcendent?

Now it is clear that the highest expression of Jewish faith in Yahweh involved the frank admission that God is transcendent and therefore not merely one object among other objects. Yahweh is incomprehensible in the sense that the human intellect and our discursive thinking cannot give an exhaustive account of him. He is ineffable in the sense that human speech about him must be always limited and inadequate. This is clearly implied in the Bible and reaffirmed again and again in the patristic period. The scholastic doctrine of analogy was likewise an attempt to steer a middle course between an agnosticism which denied any meaningful use of human language in its application to God and a literalistic anthropomorphism which believes that such language can be used in the same sense of God as of other human beings. It can hardly, therefore, be maintained that the Bible and classical theology were unaware of the transcendence of God and the inadequacy of human language or indeed of its symbolic character. The Jewish-Christian tradition, however, requires us in addition to combine with this admission the belief that the transcendent, incomprehensible and ineffable God has made his "presence" known to his people. Tillich is no doubt right in asserting that theology can only handle directly the "symbols" which emerge from an awareness of such "presence." The theological problem, however, is to arrive at certainty concerning the nature of the abyss to which our symbolic representations point. How do we know that the "God beyond theism" is in fact the God whom we have known through our symbols? Or to put it in simpler terms—how can we be sure that the transcendent and featureless abyss is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? To this question, Tillich maintains that there is no question of proving the validity of the symbols. We cannot get behind the symbols and look at that to which the symbols point, for the simple reason that we only know anything at all of the transcendent in and through the symbols which are an organic growth out of our experience of the holy. This bears a close resemblance to Austin Farrer's contention in *The Glass of Vision*¹³

13. Austin Farrer, *The Glass of Vision* (London: Dacre Press, 1948), pp. 58ff.

that revelation is given to us in divinely inspired images and we cannot get behind them. If, however, the symbols do genuinely "participate," to use Tillich's language, in the transcendent holy to which they point and in some measure express, do they not, therefore, give us a true knowledge of the transcendent, and if this is so, must they not express a non-symbolic truth also? If the unconditioned can be said to be Being in a non-symbolic sense, why cannot we also name It or He as love (agape) in a non-symbolic sense?

That we cannot get behind the symbols or the images represents an important truth, at least for all who admit the reality of a divine revelation which discloses God in his saving activity in a manner which goes beyond anything which the unaided human reason can attain. If it were possible to get behind the revelation, as it were, and compare it with a prior knowledge of God which we possessed, there would be no need of a revelation at all. Man would have a direct perception of the supernatural world without requiring any further help from God at all, whether through symbols or images. This is the truth behind Barth's somewhat misleading language of God's only being known by God. Human language can only talk about something which is given, which is already there. I leave out of account here those creative works of the human imagination which do not pretend to raise the kind of metaphysical question with which we are here concerned. If human language talks about "the given," the question is: What is given? The answer is in general terms—the transcendent made known through the ethically holy. In specific Christian terms the God of holy love of the biblical history and his saving activity in Jesus Christ. Religious language does, however, claim to be saying something, not only about historical events in which the "presence" of God is made known, but something about God in Himself. If it is insisted that the truly religious man ought to be interested in God as he manifests himself in revelation and not in some remote or abstract God in himself, the answer is evident. The religious man craves some assurance that the God he knows in revelation is the true God and that he is not deceived on this point. This was the basic reason for the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity. The Christian man wants to be certain that "the Divine abyss" does not contain demonic powers or evil forces which can overthrow the God who has made himself known in revelation. Barth would no doubt say: "Trust the revelation!" It comes with God's authority and *imprimatur*. In any case, there is nothing else we can trust, since the human reason is incapable of giving us any other kind of certainty. If we have to choose between the ambiguous certainties of natural theology and divine revelation, who can hesitate?

But this, as we have seen, will not do. We need some intelligible criteria by which we can discriminate between symbols and images in their application to God. We also need the assurance that our symbols do not point to a featureless abyss but to a God whom we have truly known in our encounter with the ethical holy and concretely and personally in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh.

It is not enough, therefore, with Tillich to say that Being is the only non-symbolic statement we can make about God and that all other statements are only symbolic in a general and undefined sense. If, as he maintains, theology can only reflect upon the "symbols" which emerge from man's living awareness of the transcendent "holy," such language presupposes some *doctrine of analogy* which enables us to say something positive about God. The religious man is vitally concerned, not only with the language which talks about the Being of God, but with the language which tells us about the moral and spiritual quality of such "Being." To satisfy his longing for *truth* about God, he needs to be assured of the metaphysical respectability of some of the things he is saying about the transcendent in addition to the fact that It or He is Being. It remains to be shown whether Tillich has really met the needs of the case at this point.