

PAUL TILlich AND THE BIBLE

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UNDER the stimulus of recent progress in linguistics and archaeology, biblical studies have flourished remarkably in the present century. Advances on the technical level have been attended by a renewal of interest in the Bible from a theological point of view. Catholic and Protestant theologians alike have been seeking to make use of the new information and to assimilate it harmoniously into their respective systems.

Unlike many other Protestant theologians of our day—the names of Eichrodt, Bultmann, and Cullmann come immediately to mind—Paul Tillich is not outstanding as a biblical scholar. He is primarily a systematic theologian. But his system has with some justification been called biblical, on the ground that it is “wholly and finally determined by the revelation of God recorded in the Bible.”¹ In his theological writings he has tried to work out a general theory of what the Bible should mean to the contemporary Protestant believer and theologian. As has been pointed out in a number of recent studies, Tillich’s system holds exceptional interest for the Catholic theologian.² His views on the Bible are perhaps especially interesting, since they exhibit some startling approaches toward the Catholic position, and at the same time some fundamental divergences.

The Bible, in Tillich’s view, is a uniquely important collection of source documents. He sees in it the primary source of God’s final revelation to mankind, the original record of man’s response to that revelation, and the basic font of Christian theology. We may conveniently consider Tillich’s biblical doctrine under each of these three heads, and then conclude our study with a brief critical appraisal.

¹ A. T. Mollegan in C. W. Kegley and R. W. Bretall (ed.), *The Theology of Paul Tillich* (New York: Macmillan, 1952) p. 230.

² Cf. notably the following three articles by Gustave Weigel, S.J.: “Contemporaneous Protestantism and Paul Tillich,” *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 11 (1950) 177–202; “Recent Protestant Theology,” *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 14 (1953) 573–85; “The Theological Significance of Paul Tillich,” *Gregorianum* 37 (1956) 34–54. Also G. H. Tavad, “The Unconditional Concern: The Theology of Paul Tillich,” *Thought* 28 (1953), 234–46; and Edward D. O’Connor, “Paul Tillich: An Impression,” *Thought* 30 (1955) 507–24.

THE BIBLE AND REVELATION

In order to understand Tillich's biblical doctrine, one must begin with a clear conception of what he means by "revelation."³ His theory of revelation is basic to his system and is quite different from that familiar to Catholics. Like most Catholic theologians, he avoids the term "natural revelation" as confusing, if not contradictory. Revelation is for him a special and extraordinary type of knowledge. It is the apprehension of the mysterious—of that which lies beyond the grasp of man's natural powers. In revelation, indeed, God manifests Himself; the human intellect is brought face to face with the transcendent God. Now man, in his present existential state—the condition of fallen nature—is estranged from his true self, and consequently from God also. This is indicated by the evident fact that our ordinary knowledge bears on finite beings, which are grasped as "objects" in opposition to ourselves. But God is neither a finite being nor an object. He is the transcendent ground of all being, including our own. Hence he cannot be reached by ordinary human knowledge. In order to acquire any genuine knowledge of God it is therefore necessary for the mind to overleap all finite categories and transcend the ordinary distinctions between subject and object. Extraordinary knowledge of this sort is what Tillich means by revelation.

Revelation has two aspects, objective and subjective. In the objective order, something really happens which manifests the mysterious ground of being. As is evident from the history of religion, revelatory events have always been described as "shaking, transforming, demanding, significant in an ultimate way."⁴ Occurrences of this kind are in Tillich's terminology called "miracles." The subjective apprehension of revelation, wherein the mind rises above its ordinary limits, is technically called "ecstasy." Revelation may therefore be described as the self-manifestation of God through miracle and ecstasy.

The terms "ecstasy" and "miracle" must be understood in the technical sense which Tillich gives them. Ecstasy in his terminology is not emotional overexcitement, nor is it a state of demonic possession destroying the rational structure of the mind. Rather, it is an elevation

³ See the chapter on "The Meaning of Revelation" in Tillich's *Systematic Theology* (University of Chicago, 1951) 1, 106–31.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

of the mind whereby it experiences union with the mysterious ground of being. By miracle, on the other hand, he does not mean a supernatural intervention of God in the order of nature. Such an interposition of God in the chain of created cause-effect relationships would, in Tillich's philosophy, be incompatible with the divine transcendence. By a miracle he therefore means an unusual event—extraordinary either in its regularity or its irregularity—which somehow points to the ultimate source of reality and of meaning. While Tillich's ontology does not directly concern us in this study, it is important to note at the outset that he denies all supernatural interventions of God in the world.

That which is revealed, as we have said, is strict mystery. It cannot be apprehended by ordinary thought and, for the same reason, it cannot be expressed in ordinary language. Propositions about revelations are not themselves revelatory. This point will be of pivotal importance in Tillich's analysis of the Bible.

On the basis of these observations about Tillich's general view of revelation, we may inquire how he conceives of revelation in the concrete.⁵ In the Christian view, he asserts, there is but one final revelation—the manifestation of God in Jesus as the Christ. This revelation was originally made through Jesus to His disciples. But the final revelation has not ceased. It goes on in the Church, and will go on to the end of time. The original revelation and its reception by the first disciples is the primary source from which all subsequent Christian revelation derives. The latter may therefore be called dependent, as contrasted with original, revelation. In opposition to the Evangelicals, who would maintain that the Spirit gives new revelations to individuals reading the Bible, Tillich maintains that the Christian revelation has been given, once for all, in its fulness, and that subsequent revelations within the Christian economy can add nothing substantially new.

Christian revelation, however, is not the only revelation. Tillich differs sharply from Barth, who would maintain that the final revelation is cast "like a stone" into the human situation, without any previous conditioning on the part of man. Man cannot receive a revelation which does not answer to a felt need. Hence the human mind must be disposed for final revelation by revelations of a preparatory character. Preparatory revelation, according to Tillich, may be called universal,

⁵ See the chapter on "Actual Revelation," *ibid.*, pp. 132–47.

not in the sense that everyone receives it, but in the sense that it can occur at any place or time.

The concrete revelations which directly prepared the Jewish people for the final revelation are recorded in the Old Testament. The New Testament contains the basic documents of the final revelation itself. The Bible, therefore, is a record of divine revelation.

But the Bible is not merely a collection of documents about revelation; it is also itself revelatory. The biblical writers were themselves involved in the revelatory events they described; they wrote as witnesses to revelation. It is even true to say that they were inspired writers. In speaking of inspiration, Tillich is careful to exclude any suggestion of supernaturalism. He explicitly rejects the notion that the Bible was divinely "dictated," or that God in any way intervened to shape the thoughts and intentions of the human authors. Inspiration, in Tillich's vocabulary, is the cognitive aspect of ecstasy. "The inspiration of the writers of the New Testament is their acceptance of Jesus as the Christ, and with him, of the New Being, of which they became witnesses." By literary inspiration Tillich understands simply the vital and creative response of an author to a revelation which he has received.⁶

As a revelatory document, the Bible transmits to us God's self-disclosure in ancient Jewish history and particularly His final manifestation in Jesus as the Christ. That message, in its revelatory dimension, cannot be set down in ordinary human language. Propositions can express contingent facts, abstract doctrines, or ethical precepts, but they cannot convey revelation. For revelation, in Tillich's view, is not scientific or factual or even practical information. It adds no new content to human knowledge, but gives it a new dimension of ultimate meaning. It manifests the ground of being, that which concerns us ultimately.⁷

While human language, in its ordinary propositional use, cannot serve as a vehicle of revelation, there is a peculiar kind of speech which is appropriate to the task. This is symbolism, which Tillich defines as the use of finite materials in order to create a revelatory situation.⁸ Symbolic speech might be described as the miracle of language. Words

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35; cf. pp. 114-15. ⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 124-29, 145.

⁸ On the question of symbolic assertions about God, cf. *ibid.*, esp. pp. 238-44.

are so used that their proper meaning is negated, and they point beyond themselves to the ultimate ground of being. The metaphors applied to God in the Old Testament are an excellent example of symbolic writing. Although often described as anthropomorphic, they are not really so; for they are charged with symbolic overtones and thereby communicate a vivid sense of God's transcendence. Not only metaphors and parables, but also myths and legends, according to Tillich, have value as symbols. The truth of a symbol, obviously, has nothing to do with its literal verification. Symbols have a type of truth peculiar to themselves; they are true to the extent that they adequately reflect the revelatory situation which they are intended to express. In his attitude toward symbolism, Tillich takes great pains to dissociate himself from the Modernists. The latter, he charges, "have interpreted religious language symbolically in order to weaken its seriousness, its power, and its spiritual impact." He is also critical of Bultmann for unjustifiably equating myth with a merely primitive world-view which should be cast aside. For Tillich, on the contrary, myth and symbol are the only way in which revelation can be communicated.⁹

The biblical writers were the recipients of a unique series of revelations leading up to God's final self-manifestation in the person of Jesus. As inspired authors, they used language with singular revelatory power. The Bible is therefore a genuine source of revelation. When read by a person with the requisite dispositions, it enables him to enter into the revelatory events described, and to share in the ecstatic experience of the biblical writers. As a medium of revelation, the Bible possesses a certain sacramental quality. It is a holy book.

THE BIBLE AND HISTORY OF RELIGION

Thus far we have considered the Bible as a record and source of revelation. But there is more in the Bible than revelation. Revelation is an act of God which necessarily implies, as its correlative, a reception on the part of man. The human reception of and response to revelation are what Tillich means by the term "religion."¹⁰

⁹ See Tillich's article, "The Present Theological Situation," *Theology Today* 6 (1949-50) 306.

¹⁰ See Tillich's *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* (University of Chicago, 1955) pp. 1-5.

Considered in the abstract, revelation and religion are very different. Revelation moves from God to man; religion moves from man to God. Revelation is divine and absolute; religion is human and contingent. In the concrete, however, revelation is not revelation except in so far as it is actually received; God's self-disclosure is proportioned to the receptive capacities of man. To see how imperfectly men have responded to divine revelation, there is no need to look beyond the Bible. It tells a constantly reiterated story of how men have resisted the word of God, distorted it by superstition, rejected it in favor of idolatry. In order to maintain the purity of revelation, the prophets raised an unceasing protest against these human perversions.

In so far as it gives an account of Jewish religion, the Bible is a historical work. But the biblical writers, quite evidently, are not historians in the same sense as a von Ranke or a Trevelyan. Their main interest is to bear witness to divine revelation. They sometimes write about historical facts which, by their miraculous character, have revelatory significance. But they also make use of myths and legends to convey their message. It is theologically unimportant, Tillich maintains, to know exactly where fact ends and fiction begins. The theologian, therefore, can be indifferent to the historical aspects of the Bible. "The truth of religious symbol has nothing to do with the truth of the empirical assertions involved in it, be they physical, psychological, or historical."¹¹

Tillich's discussion of creation and the fall is illustrative of his symbolical method of interpretation. On philosophical grounds he denies that creation and the fall are two actual past events. They are symbols which aptly express man's existential predicament—the necessarily tragic state of finite freedom. "Finite freedom, when it becomes actual, disrupts the essential, uncontested, innocent unity between finitude and its infinite ground."¹² Through their apprehension of this truth, according to Tillich, philosophers of the stature of Plato and Origen, Kant and Schelling, were driven to invoke the myth of a transcendent, non-historical fall. Since the fall was not a historical event, "it is inadequate to ask questions concerning Adam's actual state before the fall,

¹¹ *Systematic Theology* 1, 240.

¹² Quoted by R. Niebuhr in Kegley and Bretall, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

for example, whether he was mortal or immortal, or whether he was in a state of righteousness."¹³

One of Tillich's colleagues, Reinhold Niebuhr, has powerfully criticized his views on this point, alleging that they falsify "the picture of man as the Bible portrays it, and as we actually experience it."¹⁴ "There is no myth of 'the transcendent fall' in the Bible, but only the myth of a historical fall."¹⁵ Without violence to the clear intent of Scripture we cannot telescope the narratives of the creation and the fall. "There is significance in the fact that there are two stories, the one symbolizing the beginning of history and the other, the corruption of freedom in history. It is important that the two stories be separated," for that very separation shows that man's act of self-estrangement was a defection from a more ideal possibility. Biblical faith, according to Niebuhr, is distinguished from Platonistic and Oriental speculations by its strong insistence on the significance of history. Tillich, in his biblical exegesis, does not always do justice to the dimension of the historical.¹⁶

The problem of the relations between revelation and history arises most acutely in the realm of Christology. Does not the Christian faith essentially involve the factual occurrence in time of certain contingent events such as the Incarnation, the crucifixion, and the resurrection? If so, can Tillich sustain his contention that the truth of revelation has nothing to do with assertions of empirical fact? A full reply to these questions must await the appearance of Tillich's Christology in the second volume of his *Systematic Theology*. But on the basis of what he has already published, the main lines of his position seem to be clear.

The writers of the New Testament, he maintains, are interested in transmitting a religiously significant picture of Jesus, not in reporting merely factual data of a sort that could have been picked up by a sound-recording camera. The life of Jesus, as a revelatory event, has been recorded in revelatory language, that is to say, in symbolical and mythical expressions.¹⁷ It would be erroneous to look to the Bible to give us a photographic picture of Jesus, conceived according to the

¹³ *Systematic Theology*, 1, 259.

¹⁴ Niebuhr, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 225-26.

¹⁷ "The Present Theological Situation," p. 307.

principles of certain modern schools of historiography. "The original picture, which existed from the beginning, was of a numinous and interpreted character, and it was this which proved to have the power to conquer existence."¹⁸ From the point of view of religion, there is no need to supplement this picture with one that is merely factual. If scientific history wishes to try to reconstruct a "historical Jesus" according to the principles of its own methodology, it is free to do so, but such a picture will neither add nor subtract anything of theological interest. The scientist can speak with precision about the documents of revelation, but he cannot speak as a witness of revelation and hence cannot add to our revelatory knowledge. Using the techniques of his own science, he can neither confirm nor deny the revealed truth about Jesus; for revealed truth, according to Tillich, "lies within the dimension of revelatory knowledge" alone.¹⁹ A. T. Mollegan, summarizing the views of Tillich, has put the matter well:

This Biblical historical Christ is normative for Tillich. The quest of the historical Jesus which Schweitzer so brilliantly described in his book of the same name, and to which he added a revolutionary chapter, can neither replace nor support the Biblical portrait in as much as faith and theology are concerned. Conservative criticism cannot give us a purely factual Jesus which guarantees the photographic details of the Biblical historical Christ's life, nor can theological liberalism by critical methods reconstruct a "historical Jesus" who becomes a new canonical scripture supplanting the New Testament portrait, nor can radical criticism destroy the human flesh and blood existence of "the Biblical Christ."²⁰

Tillich is therefore quite unconcerned about the historicity of any particular details in the life of Jesus. But at the same time he is deeply convinced that the Christian revelation has a basis in actual fact. Even as a theologian, he can affirm that revelation always occurs in a constellation of ecstasy and miracle. Since we have revelatory writings, we can argue to the occurrence of revelation in and through Jesus. In the objective order, there unquestionably were miraculous events. Indeed, since the revelation given in Jesus as the Christ is the final revelation, the life of Jesus may be called the supreme and ecstatic

¹⁸ "A Reinterpretation of the Doctrine of the Incarnation," *Church Quarterly Review* 147 (1948-49) 145.

¹⁹ *Systematic Theology* 1, 130.

²⁰ "Christology and Biblical Criticism in Tillich," in Kegley and Bretall, *op. cit.*, p. 233.

moment of history. Tillich emphatically repudiates the suggestion that Christianity might have arisen out of some merely subjective experience:

I may express the hope that one false view is excluded by everything I have tried to say: namely, the mistake of supposing that the picture of the New Being in Jesus as the Christ is the creation of existential thought or experience. If this were the case, it would be as distorted, tragic, and sinful as existence is itself, and would not be able to overcome existence. The religious picture of the New Being in Jesus is the result of a new being: it represents the victory over existence which has taken place, and thus created the picture.²¹

The final revelation expressed in the New Testament, then, presupposes as its foundation a human individual, whose life and character were such as to support the biblical picture. Our faith and salvation, in Tillich's view, do not depend merely on the interpreted picture of Jesus, but equally on the events which that picture interprets. The miracle and the ecstasy are strictly correlative. Neither is salvific without the other. "The Christ is not the Christ without the church, and the church is not the church without the Christ."²² Faith in the Christ is capable of giving us a New Being because, by accepting the revelatory picture, we participate in the reality of the Christ. "The church from its beginning through the present participates in a reality which is different from any other reality and which, therefore, is called the New Being."²³

Thus Tillich accepts the reality of Jesus as a human individual. But he does not do so precisely on the authority of the biblical writers. He looks to them for the interpretation of the facts, but not for the facts which they interpret. He recognizes, of course, that the Gospels, like many other sections of the Bible, purport to relate actual events; they are not merely symbolic speech. Even though the Bible is not scientific history, there are factual assertions in the Bible. As a theologian, however, Tillich passes no judgment on the value of the Bible as history. When the biblical writers make historical or scientific affirmations, he would say, their statements are as reliable as the evidence on which those statements are based. There can be no such thing as revealed

²¹ "A Reinterpretation," pp. 145-46.

²² *Systematic Theology* 1, 136-37.

²³ "The Present Theological Situation," pp. 306-7.

history or revealed science, for history and science, by their very nature, do not concern us ultimately. They are not the ground of our being, and hence are not matter for revelation. The question of factual truth falls within the province of the positive sciences and cannot be prejudged from a theological point of view. "That which concerns us ultimately is not linked with any special conclusion of historical and philological research. A theology which is dependent on predetermined results of the historical approach is bound to something conditional which claims to be unconditional, that is, with something demonic."²⁴

Many theologians, according to Tillich, have failed to recognize that the Bible was written by human authors, who were fallible as witnesses of historical fact. There has thus arisen a sort of biblical "monophysitism." The practice of referring to the Bible as the "word of God" has been one source of this confusion. It has given support to supernaturalistic theories of inspiration and the dogma of the infallible book.²⁵ Great harm has come to religion from this type of thinking. Theologians, anxiously seeking to suppress elements of truth of which they were dimly aware, have become fanatical. In their efforts to reconcile the Bible with science, they have used "sacred dishonesty." After committing themselves to certain scientific theories on theological grounds, theologians have then sought to prevent the diffusion of new theories, only to capitulate ignominiously when further resistance became impossible. "This ill-conceived resistance of theologians from the time of Galileo to the time of Darwin was one of the causes of the split between religion and secular culture in the past centuries."²⁶

Rightly understood, there can be no conflict between science and theology; they move in different dimensions. While scientific investigation cannot dissolve revelation, "it can undercut superstitious and demonic interpretations of revelation, ecstasy, and miracle."²⁷ Historical criticism, for example, protects us against an idolatrous fundamentalism in our interpretation of the Bible. By calling attention to the mythical elements in Scripture, it removes the false offense of pseudo-history and permits the Gospel to confront men with the true offense of the doctrine of the cross.²⁸ In such ways as this, the positive

²⁴ *Systematic Theology* 1, 36.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 130. Cf. pp. 3, 36.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

²⁸ Mollegan, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

sciences are the allies of theology in its struggle against distortions of genuine revelation.

Tillich therefore distinguishes sharply between the revelatory value of the Bible and its value as a historical document. In so far as it is revelatory, it manifests the ultimate ground of being and is not subject to error. In so far as it deals with historical facts, including religious history, it is neither inspired nor infallible. Even the religion of the biblical writers, Tillich would say, is imperfect. Religion, the reception of revelation, is always inadequate. As a human act, it belongs to the realm of history. Just as the Jews of Old Testament times were not immune from religious error, so too the biblical writers were capable of distorting the revelations which came their way. They were not exempt from the limitations of their own abilities and temperament nor from the unhealthy influence of their secular and religious environment.²⁹ Thus the true message of the final revelation, the Christian kerygma, is not the arithmetical sum of the religious ideas which can be found in the Bible. The sacred writers did not receive the divine message in all its purity.

The Bible, Tillich insists, is not all of a piece. There is a higher level of revelation in the New Testament than in the Old, and even in the New Testament not all parts are of equal value. The high point is the religious picture of Jesus communicated through the interpreted events of the Gospel story and the semi-mythological reflections of John and Paul. The Gospel, in its main lines, shows us the career of a man completely submissive to the divine demands, surrendering Himself even to the death of the cross. St. Paul expresses the significance of these events through the symbolism of a pre-existent spiritual being who takes on the form of a servant.³⁰ St. John, teaching the lesson of the crucifixion, presents Jesus as saying, "he who believes in me does not believe in *me* . . ."³¹ In this vision of a man totally transparent to the divine we have, in Tillich's opinion, the final and unsurpassable revelation.

But even in the New Testament, Tillich would concede, the gold of revelation is mixed with dross. There is evidence of an idolatrous ex-

²⁹ *Biblical Religion*, pp. 21-22.

³⁰ "A Reinterpretation," p. 135. Cf. Phil 2:5 ff.

³¹ *Systematic Theology* 1, 136. Cf. Jn 12:44.

altation of Jesus to a semi-divine status. In the miracle narratives of the later New Testament traditions Tillich detects the incursions of a demonic supernaturalism.³²

Tillich therefore finds it possible to use the Bible in so far as it is revelatory in order to criticize the Bible as a religious document. In virtue of what he calls the "Protestant principle"—that is, the refusal to exalt anything finite to the level of ultimate concern—he feels entitled to reject certain elements in the Bible itself. "Protestant theology protests in the name of the Protestant principle against the identification of our ultimate concern with any creation of the church, including the biblical writings insofar as their witness to what is really ultimate concern is also a conditioned expression of their own spirituality."³³

THE BIBLE AND THEOLOGY

Theology, in Tillich's synthesis, is clearly distinguished from revelation. It is not revelation, but rather a particular form of man's religious response to revelation. The theologian's task is to construct an ordered body of knowledge concerning revelation.

The Christian message, or kerygma, is in Tillich's view identical with the final revelation. Christian theology, therefore, is not the Christian message, but only a reflection on that message. "While the message itself is beyond our grasp and never at our disposal (though it might grasp us and dispose of us), its theological interpretation is an act of the church and of individuals within the Church."³⁴ Religious orthodoxy—of which American fundamentalism is an instance—falls into the error of confusing a particular formulation of the message with the message itself. Such a confusion has "demonic" traits in so far as it ascribes eternal and infinite value to something which is by its very nature conditioned, finite, and temporal. Even the "neo-orthodox" theologians—in spite of their principle that "God is in heaven and man on earth"—have committed the mistake of trying to create an unconditioned theology. Barth, while laudably attempting to focus attention on the eternal kerygma, has allowed his work to become tainted with what Tillich might call the heresy of orthodoxy.³⁵

³² *Ibid.*, p. 115. Cf. p. 15.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 52.

Theology, in so far as it is a reflection on revelation, must be based on revelation. The sources of Christian theology are the documents of the final revelation which occurred in Jesus as the Christ. In opposition to the neo-orthodox, Tillich maintains that there are other Christian sources than the Bible, such as, for example, ecclesiastical tradition. But the Bible is the basic source, for it is the original document about the events upon which the Christian church is founded.³⁶

In addition to sources, theology must have a norm, that is, a criterion in terms of which the sources are evaluated and interpreted.³⁷ The norm, as the formal element in theology, must itself be derived from the sources. If the norm were taken from philosophy or science, one could have a philosophy of religion, but not a genuine theology.

The Bible is not, never has been, and could not itself be the theological norm. For one thing, we cannot learn from the biblical books that they are canonical. The canon of the Bible must therefore be determined by something other than the Bible alone. The history of Christianity has shown certain variations of opinion about the limits of the biblical canon. These variations—which Tillich regards as a healthy sign of life and freedom—are due to varying conceptions of the theological norm. Even with respect to books acknowledged as canonical, they have never in practice been treated as all having equal authority. The Old Testament, Tillich observes, has never been directly normative; it has been measured by the New. And even the New Testament has never been equally influential in all its parts.³⁸

Tillich is sharply critical of evangelicist biblicism, which attempts to erect the Bible into a self-sufficient norm. Such an attitude, he maintains, is sheer self-deception. The solitary reader of the Bible is more dependent on the church than he is usually aware. He has received the Bible as preserved by the church, as presented to him by the church, and as interpreted by the church, "even if this interpretation comes to him simply by way of the accepted translation into his own language."³⁹ It is quite impossible for the contemporary reader of the Bible to leap over two thousand years of church history and enter into the situation of Matthew or Paul. In point of fact, Tillich observes, the "biblical" theology of the evangelicists is heavily indebted to the dog-

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 34–35.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

matic developments of post-Reformation theology. "Through historical scholarship the difference between the dogmatic teaching of most American evangelistic churches and the original meaning of the biblical texts can easily be shown."⁴⁰

Thus the norm of theology, although primarily based on the Bible, is not the Bible, nor is it derived from the Bible alone. Historically, the theological norm has always been derived from an encounter between the Bible and the church. Ecclesiastical tradition, according to Tillich, plays an indispensable part in the establishment of the theological norm. He does not, however, admit the right of church authorities to dictate to theologians what their norm should be.⁴¹

In the concrete, what is the norm of theology? In answer to this question Tillich distinguishes between a negative norm, or critical principle, and a positive norm. We have already mentioned the critical principle in connection with Tillich's evaluation of Scripture; it is the axiom that no finite object should be identified with that which concerns us ultimately. This principle suffices to exclude false theologies, but does not give us the true one. The positive element in the norm is the particular way in which that which concerns us ultimately manifests itself. Since the final revelation is the manifestation of God in Jesus as the Christ, the appearance of Jesus as the Christ is the positive norm for Christian theology.

The total norm, taken in its positive and negative aspects, is the criterion for using all the sources of systematic theology. The norm for the use of Scripture is the final manifestation of what concerns us ultimately in the *biblical* picture of Jesus as the Christ.⁴²

Every theologian, even the "biblical" theologian, must take cognizance of the theological norm. Biblical theology should not be treated as though it were a profane discipline. In its "material" aspect—if it be permissible to introduce a Scholastic term not found in Tillich's exposition—it is a historico-critical discipline, concerned with philological and exegetical problems. But the biblical theologian cannot stop on the scientific level. "Formally" as a theologian he must unite philology with faith and devotion; he must give a genuinely theological appraisal and interpretation of biblical doctrine with reference to the norm of theology. It is exceedingly difficult to strike a proper balance

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 37. ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 50-52. ⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 48-50.

between these two points of view, the critical and the pneumatic. But sound biblical theology is of inestimable importance. "Only such free historical work, united with the attitude of ultimate concern, can open the Bible up to the systematic theologian as his basic source."⁴³

Just as biblical theology is dependent on philology and history for its contents, so systematic theology derives its material mainly from biblical theology. Systematic theology is the effort to construct a methodical synthesis of Christian doctrine appropriate to the needs of a given age and culture. The precise principles governing the theological synthesis will vary to some extent from century to century. For the purposes of his own system, Tillich formulates the theological norm in terms of the "New Being" which became manifest in Jesus as the Christ. This norm is basically biblical, since it is inspired by the Pauline concept of the "new creation." Thus formulated, the norm of systematic theology is adapted to the present state of culture and society. It points to the Christian message as the answer to the anxieties and needs of our age, which is haunted by the fear of self-estrangement, dissolution, and conflict.⁴⁴

If it be objected that systematic theology, as he conceives and practices it, is not fully biblical, Tillich defends himself by calling attention to the precedent set by the biblical authors themselves. Textual criticism, he points out, makes it clear that they used and transformed the categories and symbols current in their own religious and cultural tradition.⁴⁵ The work of adaptation was continued by the primitive church—and quite properly so. Tillich repudiates the rigid biblicism expounded by Ritschl and Harnack, who accused the early church of having betrayed biblical religion by relating it positively to the concerns of Graeco-Roman culture. What Harnack called the Hellenization of the Gospel was a necessary step, both because the Gospel had to be introduced into the Hellenistic world and because the discovery of the ontological question by the Greek mind is universally relevant. "On this point, the early church was right, however questionable its concrete solutions may have been, and its nineteenth-century critics were wrong."⁴⁶

This last observation brings us to a final criticism of biblicism with

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 36. ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁴⁵ A. T. Molleghan, *op. cit.*, p. 237. ⁴⁶ *Biblical Religion*, p. 60.

which we may conclude our summary of Tillich's views on the relations between the Bible and theology. The biblicists vainly seek to construct a theology which would avoid the ontological question. Such a theology, according to Tillich, is impossible. Since theology deals with our ultimate concern, it cannot escape the question of being, any more than can philosophy. Even the Bible, Tillich points out, describes the structure of experience in ontological terms. Not only the sapiential books and the theological meditations of John and Paul, but even the Synoptic Gospels abound in terms—such as time, law, life, love, and knowledge—pregnant with ontological significance.

It is surprising how casually theological biblicists use a term like "history" when speaking of Christianity as a historical religion or of God as the "Lord of history." They forget that the meaning they connect with the word "history" has been formed by thousands of years of historiography and philosophy of history. They forget that historical being is one kind of being in addition to others and that, in order to distinguish it from the word "nature," for instance, a general vision of the structure of being is presupposed. They forget that the problem of history is tied up with the problems of time, freedom, accident, purpose, etc. . . . The theologian must take seriously the meaning of the terms he uses. . . . Therefore, the systematic theologian must be a philosopher in critical understanding even if not in creative power.⁴⁷

Thus Tillich, while relying on the Bible as the basic source of the final revelation, directly opposes the narrow biblicism which has tended to stunt the growth of Protestant theology in the past. Against Pascal and many Protestant fideists he loudly proclaims that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the same as the God of the philosophers.⁴⁸ Tillich has been bold enough to undertake a statement of the Christian message in fully ontological terms. However one may appraise the results of his efforts, he has unquestionably made a great contribution to the revival of metaphysical thinking within Protestant circles in our day.

EVALUATION

For the Catholic reader the most disconcerting element in Tillich's treatment of the Bible, as in other areas of his thought, is his total rejection of the supernatural. His position in this regard radically affects his entire understanding of the Christian revelation. The Bible,

⁴⁷ *Systematic Theology* 1, 21. ⁴⁸ *Biblical Religion*, p. 85.

for him, is not a supernaturally inspired book, nor does it contain revealed precepts, doctrines, or history. The biblical account of man's creation and fall is valid as symbolism, but tells us nothing about the prehistoric past. Even the Incarnation and the redemption, which for classical Christianity constitute the central message of the Bible, are not, in Tillich's view, events which actually occurred. While admitting that these terms have mythical value in symbolizing the union of human existence with its creative ground, he refuses to accept them as properly descriptive of what objectively transpired. The notion of a unique ontological union between God and creature, such as underlies the traditional doctrines of the Incarnation, the Mystical Body, and sanctifying grace, is in Tillich's eyes idolatrous. His so-called Protestant principle is but one expression of his conviction that there can be no *communicatio idiomatum* between God and created natures.

Although Tillich continues to speak of the Christian revelation as "final," his conception of Christianity has little in common with what is usually understood by that term. In the words of a recent Protestant critic:

If Tillich is right, the objective faith of the apostles and of the great company of Christian witnesses throughout the ages was wrong, and he plainly tells us so. . . . There is, for Tillich, no personal God who *objectively is*, who rules the nations and our lives, and who has judged us and saved us in Christ Jesus by his own coming into the world, being crucified, and being raised from the grave. Nor is there, for him, any life after death for us all, and thus no eventual solution to the tragedies and evils of our existence.⁴⁹

To go into Tillich's reasons for excluding the supernatural would take us beyond the limits of the present study. In part they are philosophical. Since he does not admit the analogy of being as understood by Scholastic philosophers, he does not conceive of God as the Absolute Being, subsisting in Himself, fully distinct from creatures. Rather, God is for him the immanent-transcendent ground of finite being. For Tillich it therefore seems repugnant that God should act on creatures externally, as an efficient cause, or that He should preferentially unite Himself to some rather than others. To assert any such intervention, he maintains, is to degrade God to the status of a particular, finite

⁴⁹ Nels Ferré, review of *Biblical Religion*, in *Christian Century* 72 (Nov. 2, 1955) 1273.

being—one which acts upon, or unites with, others existing alongside of itself.

To many of his critics it has seemed that, in his rejection of the supernatural, Tillich inevitably falls into a sort of naturalism. This criticism has been made from the Catholic side by Gustave Weigel, S.J., and from the Protestant side by Nels Ferré. It has also been made from a non-theistic point of view by J. H. Randall, who shrewdly observes that "revelation" for Tillich "would seem to be a symbol for the power of reason to do what revelation notoriously does."⁵⁰ Sometimes Tillich himself refers to his system as "self-transcending or ecstatic naturalism,"⁵¹ a term which suggests that he is basically a naturalist, though not of the reductionist stamp. But if Tillich is a naturalist, it is not because he wants to be. His constant endeavor has been to find a middle path between naturalism and supernaturalism. Quite recently he has affirmed: "My thinking is not naturalistic. Naturalism and supernaturalism provoke each other and should be removed together."⁵²

While Tillich's blanket rejection of the supernatural order is clearly unacceptable to the Catholic, it should be remarked that his critique of "supernaturalism" contains elements of great worth. It is true, for example, that naturalism tends to generate, by way of reaction, an unwholesome supernaturalism. Efforts to demonstrate the reality of the supernatural with quasi-mathematical exactitude from alleged violations of physical laws have all too often been based on an uncritical acceptance of rationalistic presuppositions. As Tillich puts it: "A kind of rationalist irrationalism develops in which the degree of absurdity in a miracle story becomes the measure of its religious value. The more impossible, the more revelatory!"⁵³ Tillich renders a valuable service in stressing that anti-naturalism of this sort does small honor to God, and that the prodigy-aspect of miracles should not be allowed to overshadow their function as religious signs. Thus far he is in line with biblical thinking. The notion of miracle, as found for example in Exodus, is hardly equivalent to the violation of a physical law. As G. E. Wright has said: "In the Bible a miracle is something quite

⁵⁰ In Kegley and Bretall, *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, p. 149.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 341.

⁵² In letter to G. Weigel, *Gregorianum* 37 (1956) 53-54.

⁵³ *Systematic Theology* 1, 115.

different. It is any spectacular happening or 'wonder' which is a 'sign' of God's working."⁵⁴

Beginning with the time of Newman, many Catholic authors have pointed out the inadequacy of defining miracles as though they were simply contraventions of the laws of nature, and the urgency of restoring the traditional emphasis on the religious and revelatory dimension.⁵⁵ Miracles, according to this conception, are astonishing events in which contingent causes are raised to a higher pitch of efficacy, producing effects which betoken the kingdom of God. Normally, at least, these wonders admit of a twofold interpretation—like the heavenly voice which the Jews explained as thunder (Jn 12: 29). But the whole context of a miracle is such that the religious-minded inquirer is able to recognize the direct activity of God. Such a view of miracles embodies a supernaturalism which is the reverse of anti-naturalistic. It affirms that nature, instead of being a completely self-enclosed system, is open to the intervention of a higher Liberty, and that God can make use of created agencies to bestow gifts that are divine.

A similar critique may be made of Tillich's comments on inspiration. He rightly rejects the "supernaturalistic" view which would depict God as dictating the Bible or as substituting His own activity for the natural processes of the human mind. Inspiration is indeed—to use Tillich's own term—essentially ecstatic. That is to say, it implies that the rational structure of the mind is preserved and elevated, although transcended. It is quite true that some theologians, wishing to stress the divine authorship of the Bible, have pictured scriptural inspiration as a "demonic" possession of the mind by God. But no such charge can be made against official Catholic teaching or against the doctrine of St. Thomas. Aquinas ceaselessly emphasized the fact that God respects the freedom and rationality of the human author. Strictly scriptural inspiration, in the Thomistic view, does not involve any infusion of new information. It does not dispense the author from gathering his facts and forming his conceptions by natural methods, nor does it prevent him from expressing himself according to the thought-patterns

⁵⁴ G. Ernest Wright, "The Faith of Israel," in *The Interpreter's Bible* 1 (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1952) 366.

⁵⁵ This point of view is well expressed by André Liégé, O.P., "Réflexions théologiques sur le miracle," in *Pensée scientifique et foi chrétienne* (Paris: Fayard, 1953) pp. 206-18. See also the accompanying bibliography, p. 223.

and idioms of his own age and culture. For this reason, St. Thomas explains, the hagiographers "more commonly spoke about matters which could be known by human reason, and not as it were in the name of God, but in their own name (*ex persona propria*), although with the assistance of the divine light."⁵⁸

Thus Tillich's attack on supernaturalism is directed less against the perennial Catholic doctrine than against the rationalistic distortions which tended to infect Christian apologetics in the era of Newtonian scientism. The same may be said of Tillich's biblical theology in general. He is mainly concerned with refuting errors and exaggerations which have arisen in the past few centuries, especially that radical biblicism which is distinctively Protestant. Catholics, who have never looked on the Bible as a self-sufficient source of revelation, can concur in many of Tillich's strictures on biblicism.

As regards the authorship of Scripture, the comments on inspiration in the preceding paragraphs indicate both the justice and the exaggeration in Tillich's views. He is on solid ground when he protests against a "monophysitism" which would ignore the role of the human author. He is right in insisting that the Bible did not drop down from heaven without any relation to the human situation, but that it reflects the patient pedagogy by which God gradually prepared mankind for the fulness of revelation in Christ. But Tillich goes to the opposite extreme and falls into a sort of inverse monophysitism. He tends to overlook the divine element in Holy Scripture, and in effect denies that it is the word of God. Thus he needlessly repudiates an article of faith as ancient and sacred as Christianity itself, and leaves the Christian believer without authoritative guidance.

Tillich does well, once again, in refusing to interpret the Bible with a literalism that would be sheerly verbalistic. The Catholic tradition has always recognized that Holy Scripture, in its literal meaning (*sensus litteralis*), is rich in imaginative, poetic, and figurative features. In recent years, moreover, the typical and secondary senses of Scripture have been made the object of intense theological study. As regards the historical sections of the Bible, every Catholic exegete would agree with Tillich's assertion that they are not "pure history" as conceived

⁵⁸ *Summa theologiae* 2-2, ^oq. 174, a. 2, ad 3m. The Thomistic doctrine of scriptural inspiration is admirably expounded by P. Synave, O.P., and P. Benoît, O.P., in the volume *La prophétie* of the *Somme théologique* (Paris: Ed. Revue des Jeunes, 1947).

in the secular tradition of post-Renaissance times. In order to ascertain the precise qualities of biblical history, one would have to make a more detailed analysis of the individual books than Tillich has done. As for the Gospels, there is no doubt that the evangelists wrote as witnesses to their faith, eager to convey the religious significance of the events they related. But it should also be noted that they attach great importance to the reality of some of these events. St. Paul, likewise, goes to great pains to establish that the resurrection was an objective occurrence, attested by competent witnesses. He even states that, if Jesus had not truly risen from the dead, the Christian's faith would be a miserable deception (1 Cor 15:1-19).

Tillich unduly minimizes the historical elements in the Bible. He even proclaims that "theology does not imply factual assertions," since particular occurrences do not concern us ultimately.⁵⁷ Yet he solemnly affirms, as we have seen, that there was a Jesus who lived on earth and spoke with His disciples. In making this assertion, is he not in fact relying somewhat on the results of modern biblical criticism, which generally affirms that there is a historical "core" to the Gospel story? Dorothy Emmet, who puts this question, remarks that Tillich seems to want "to have it both ways."⁵⁸ More fundamentally: does the question whether Jesus was a historical character fall within the province of theology? If so, Tillich must admit that theology and history can overlap, and that theologians and historians, operating within their own proper fields, might contradict each other. If not, he has no right to maintain as a theologian that Jesus was a real person. Logically, he is bound to admit that the Christian revelation could be a product of merely subjective experience. It does not seem that Tillich has succeeded in erecting a theology which is fully insulated from empirical fact. The relations between Christianity and history are better indicated by Cullmann's suggestive formula, "revealed history."

When he turns to the relations between the Bible and theology, Tillich makes many observations with which Catholics will agree. He clearly demonstrates that the Bible is not the sole source of Christian theology, and that ecclesiastical tradition is a legitimate theological

⁵⁷ *Systematic Theology* 1, 130. Cf. *supra*, p. 354.

⁵⁸ In Kegley and Bretall, *op. cit.*, p. 213. Tillich has promised (*ibid.*, pp. 79-80) to give a fuller treatment of the problem of the "historical Jesus" in Volume 2 of his *Systematic Theology*.

quarry. His assertion that "dependent revelation" continues to be given in the church through the power of the Spirit inevitably reminds the Catholic of his own belief that there is a legitimate development of dogma.⁵⁹

Catholics will agree also with Tillich's insistence that the Bible is not itself the theological norm. Neither the canon of Scripture nor a coherent interpretation of its contents can be arrived at without consulting ecclesiastical tradition.⁶⁰ Tillich even goes so far as to maintain that church decisions have a certain normative force, although he does not grant that they are binding on theologians. The Catholic, of course, accepts the Church's claim to teach with divine authority.

Tillich does well to emphasize that Christian doctrine cannot be a static thing. The radical biblicist, in his unwillingness to depart from the letter of the Bible, is unfaithful to its spirit. As Tillich points out, the Gospel cannot have its due impact unless it is presented in ways suitable to the needs and capacities of each successive generation. Although Tillich's conception of the kerygma does not quite coincide with the Catholic notion of the "data of revelation," his efforts to distinguish between the kerygma and theology will prove stimulating to many Catholic theologians. His emphasis on the "answering" function of systematic theology is in full accord with Catholic teaching on doctrinal development and adaptation. As Fr. Weigel has written: "The Tillichian principle of correlation is not a new discovery but only an urgent exhortation to use efficiently the principle always functioning in the theological enterprise, though it often functions with less than desirable energy."⁶¹

Finally, Tillich gives a very sound exposition of the relations of biblical theology to scientific criticism on the one hand and to systematic theology on the other. Biblical theology, as he rightly holds, is an intermediate discipline, essentially ordered toward systematic theology. Catholics, accustomed to the dogmatic syntheses of the Scholastic doctors, generally recognize that theology cannot confine itself

⁵⁹ Cf. G. Tavad, "The Unconditional Concern," *Thought* 28 (1953) 244.

⁶⁰ In this connection it is interesting to observe how frequently the councils, in their authoritative interpretations of sacred texts, invoke the witness of Catholic tradition. The expression, "quemadmodum Ecclesia catholica ubique diffusa semper intellexit," or its equivalent, recurs frequently. For examples, see *DB* 102, 791, 938, 1823.

⁶¹ In *Gregorianum* 37 (1956) 50.

to merely biblical categories. The Christian message should be set forth, as far as possible, in genuinely metaphysical terms, answering to the ontological hunger of the human mind.

But speculative theology is a delicate enterprise, never entirely free from the risk of denaturing the Gospel. One must be on guard against trying to squeeze divine revelation into any man-made framework of metaphysical speculation. The great Scholastic theologians recognized this. While making use of Platonic and Aristotelian conceptual schemes, they allowed the data of revelation to correct, enlarge, and inwardly transform their philosophical categories.⁶² They saw likewise that every metaphysical transposition of Christian teaching must of its very nature fall short of the divine message, grasped in faith. They were therefore content that their theological systems should echo, faintly but not unfaithfully, the truths of revelation.

It is here, more than anywhere else, that Tillich goes astray. Like the Scholastic doctors, he sets out to achieve a Christian wisdom. He brings an impressive array of philosophical tools to the task. Familiar with nearly the whole range of Western philosophy, he makes particularly fruitful use of modern German speculation. The idealism of Schelling, the subjectivism of Schleiermacher, the phenomenism of Otto, and the existentialism of Heidegger all provide him with valuable insights. But he does not sufficiently purify his philosophical categories in the light of the revealed message. Instead, he lets the exigencies of his philosophical system determine in advance what God's revelation can and cannot be. The biblical message is reduced to the dimensions of an all-too-human philosophy.

Because of this initial error in method, Tillich's efforts to translate the "primitive personalism" of biblical religion into a sophisticated theological scheme are vitiated at the source. Inevitably, the living God of Abraham and Isaac loses his distinctive traits and becomes merged into an amorphous, "transpersonal" ground of being—the product of philosophical speculation. In the name of his private metaphysical theories, Tillich denies that God has really performed those deeds of love which have always been regarded as the very substance of the biblical teaching.

⁶² The transfiguration of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy under the impact of Christian dogma has been brilliantly sketched by E. Gilson in *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy* (New York: Scribner's, 1936), especially the last two chapters.