

## THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY IN TILLICH'S THOUGHT

William W. Paul, Ph.D.

Professor Arthur F. Holmes published a significant study of "The Role of Philosophy in Tillich's Theology" in the *ETS Bulletin*, Summer 1967. This was originally presented at the Thirteenth Wheaton College Philosophy Conference (1966) as were my remarks which follow. The word "interplay" in my title is intended to indicate the different focus which I place upon the issues raised by Dr. Holmes' provocative paper. I have also tried to stress the positive insights in Paul Tillich's dynamic conception of the interaction between philosophy and theology whose value, I think, are independent of Tillich's own Heideggerian and theologically liberal language. For the most part, however, I wish to underscore Holmes' presentation of Tillich's desire to move beyond older forms of empiricism and rationalism and to bring together approaches which are at once analytic, existential and phenomenological. I begin by extending his analysis of Tillich as philosopher and theologian; then turn to the issues raised about Tillich as an "answering theologian," and finally make a comment on Holmes' own suggestions for employing existential phenomenology as a philosophical method.

### I. Tillich as Philosophical Theologian

The paper under discussion forces us to think anew about the interplay that may exist between philosophy and theology. When Paul Tillich assumed the chair of philosophical theology at Union Theological Seminary in 1941 he said that the center of his thought and work was on the boundary between philosophy and theology. His fifty-five years of writing reveal that he enjoyed the intellectual freedom of a philosopher while remaining committed to his theological message of "The Jesus which is the Christ." In his address he said that philosophy at its best is rooted in ontology, in uncovering some of the fundamental characteristics and powers of existence which control man and nature. This is its contribution to theology. Theology too is concerned with being, and "this makes the division between philosophy and theology impossible."<sup>1</sup> The task of theology is "to ask for being as far as it gives ultimate concern. Theology deals with what concerns us inescapably, ultimately, unconditionally. It deals with it not as far as it *is* (philosophy) but as far as it is *for us*."<sup>2</sup> It follows for Tillich that theology must always be basically existential. Theology must relate itself to the root categories and elements of existence to which philosophy points and it

1. *The Protestant Era*, U. of Chicago Press, 1948, p. 86.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 87

must itself point to the "ultimate ground and power and norm and aim of being"<sup>3</sup> from which man and nature tend to be separated.

What the theologian points to obviously involves a stance of faith which the philosopher may or may not personally possess. In his *Dynamics of Faith*, written while university professor at Harvard, Tillich reaffirmed his view that philosophy at its best not only does ontology but also exhibits an ultimate concern or an existential basis from which it carries out its theoretically probing work. "Philosophy, in its genuine meaning," he said, "is carried on by people in whom the passion of an ultimate concern is united with a clear and detached observation of the way ultimate reality manifests itself in the processes of the universe. It is this element of ultimate concern behind philosophical ideas which supplies the truth of faith in them. Their vision of the universe and of man's predicament within it unites faith and conceptual work."<sup>4</sup> Granted that there may be some unclarity in Tillich's view that mature philosophy provides a union of philosophical truth expressed conceptually with the truth of faith expressed through theological symbols, yet it is this great vision of the philosophic enterprise which we must keep in mind when we ask about "The Role of Philosophy in Tillich's Theology." He is prepared to defend the philosopher's freedom to explore critically all systems and schools of thought, but he does not have in mind people who are satisfied simply to play an epistemological game, or those who do the history of philosophy while holding each system off at arms length, or even those who do moral philosophy minus an ontological and religious ground.<sup>5</sup> As he said in 1941, "There is no philosophy deserving the name without transformation of the human existence of the philosopher, without his ultimate concern and without his faith in his election for truth in the place to which he belongs."<sup>6</sup>

Such is the focus on philosophy that we should keep in mind. As a philosophical theologian Tillich rather consistently maintained his habitation on the boundary—doing, as Holmes points out, apologetic more than kerygmatic theology. It does not seem correct then to say with Holmes that Tillich was a theologian "rather than" a philosopher or that he was "forced" into philosophy (p. 161). I cannot find any such sharp separation in Tillich's writings. He participated quite willingly and creatively in the two-fold task to which Holmes calls our attention: (1) clarifying the ontological questions to which theology must speak, and (2) providing theology with conceptual tools for correlating the Christian message with man's existential need. When Tillich is at his best in analyzing "the basic ontological structure" in the first volume

3. *Ibid.*, p. 88

4. *Dynamics of Faith*, Harper, 1957, p. 92.

5. On this last option see *Tillich's Morality and Beyond*, Harper and Row, 1963, and *Systematic Theology* III, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1963, pp. 266-74. Cf. also Tillich's criticism of Niebuhr in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, ed. Charles Kegley and R. Bretall, Macmillan, 1956, Chap. 2.

6. *Protestant Era*, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

of his *Systematic Theology*, he develops his position functionally (not just structurally) in terms of man's encounters with his world.<sup>7</sup> Students of that volume are familiar with his valuable discussion of the polar character of the "elements" which are functionally discerned in man's encounter with the nature of being or existence: individualization and universalization, dynamics and form, freedom and destiny. In his treatment of some of the traditional categories (time, space, causality, substance) he uses the existentialist perspective to consider their meaning for a world viewed as creaturely, finite, and separated in part from its true or essential nature. Thus time, for example, is not an abstract category, but is treated in terms of the anxiety and courage man experiences as he accepts the transitory character of his own being. In spite of the ambiguities which Tillich's approach contains, it has provided a rich and significant contemporary philosophical framework for working out a world view which is open to the insights of a Christian theistic perspective. I suspect that this is a conclusion with which Holmes would readily agree. It is what he calls an "enriched understanding of reason." (p. 169).

Perhaps one of the things which apparently led Holmes to see more separation between philosophy and theology in Tillich than I do is that at times Tillich does seem to imply that "Philosophy can only point up the question, not give the answer" (p. 166). The "method of correlation" requires philosophy to go to theology for the answers to its own questions. As a result of criticism on this point Tillich sought to clarify his position a bit in volume two of the *Theology*. It is the *existential* question—man in the conflicts of his existential situation—which cannot be "the source for the *revelatory* answer formulated by theology."<sup>8</sup> Speaking specifically of existentialism as a means for the *analysis* of existence, he says that existentialists can give answers only by appealing to some extra-analytic aspects of their philosophies, perhaps humanism or some form of religious outlook.<sup>9</sup> Part of the problem with Tillich's approach at this point, I suspect, is that he does not distinguish in many contexts between philosophy's more restricted analytic task and its larger concern with providing understanding and vision. It is the latter which I have chosen to stress in Tillich's writings, although I do not think that he intended to separate the analytic and synthetic functions of philosophy in their interplay with theology.

In this same connection it should be mentioned that Tillich contributes to the seeming gap between the two domains through a dual-

7. *S. T. I*, pp. 168-210. See John Randall's criticism and Tillich's response in *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, ed. Charles Kegley and R. Bretall, Macmillan, 1952, Chapter 6, pp. 154 and 342.

8. *S. T. II*, p. 13

9. *S. T. II*, p. 25. It is interesting to note that in I, p. 62 he says it is *theology* which makes the analysis, while the following page says it is a *philosophical* task. I surmise that he is talking about a *philosophical* theology.

ism in his theory of knowledge. I have in mind his distinction between "controlling knowledge" and "receiving knowledge."<sup>10</sup> The first implies detached, technical and analytical reasoning, and the other, union and participation between the knower and the known. While Tillich sees that these come into a unity in what we call "understanding", the kind of philosophy and theology which he prefers doing himself is certainly on the side of participation, of receiving and "being grasped." Existentialism is, in fact, knowledge by participation. So he seems to be saying that although philosophy is *basically* detached and theoretical and without existential concern, the creative philosopher is one who has been moved by an ultimate concern and whose philosophy is to that extent not devoid of "answers." But if there is a "theological" element in that type of philosophizing, then, as Dorothy Emmet points out, the next question to be resolved is "how are we to recognize and reckon with this element without allowing philosophy to become obscurantist or authoritarian?"<sup>11</sup> Holmes, too, asks about the influence of "theological preconceptions" (p. 166). In my opinion the answer to *that* question is to have the philosopher (as philosopher) treat his theological insights as exploratory hypotheses to be spelled out and tested in terms of their meaning-giving power. And the theologian needs to reciprocate, especially if he is a philosophical theologian. This, I think, is what Tillich has tried to do in practice. There can be little doubt that he has been exploratory in theology—seeking new forms for the old substance.

## II. Tillich as "Answering Theologian"

Because of this rather lengthy re-focusing of our understanding of Tillich's attitude toward philosophy and of its interrelationship with theology, we are now prepared to deal concisely with Holmes' queries about Tillich's role as an "answering theologian."

Let us begin again with the problem of philosophy's inability in itself to provide what Tillich would call a "revelatory answer" to the "existential question" of man's predicament. It is no doubt confusing at first to be told that "man is the question" and then to get the theological interpretation that this question amounts to "asserting the inability of man to reach God under his own power."<sup>12</sup> Yet this is the question to which the answering theologian must speak and before which philosophy without divine insight is dumb.

Holmes admits (p. 163) that at least one of Tillich's predilections—ultimate concern—is a great asset in a phenomenology of faith. But for the most part Holmes is concerned lest the theologian's preconcep-

10. *S. T. I*, pp. 97ff.

11. *The Theology of Paul Tillich, op. cit.*, p. 114.

12. *S. T. II*, p. 13. He says the supernaturalists and neo-orthodox theologians are right in making this assertion concerning man's total inability.

tions should determine the phenomenological description of the structure of being and consequently the way in which the question of man is expressed (p. 166). Tillich can only partially protect himself against this criticism. His claim is that the *material* for the question<sup>7</sup> is independent of theology and arises from "the whole of human experience and its manifold ways of expression." But he admits that the *form* of the existential question is dependent upon the whole theological system and the religious answers to man's problem which it offers.<sup>13</sup> This is surely a very abstract way of handling the problem of the interrelationship between two sectors of human experience and knowledge. Surely the *selection* and *interpretation* of the "material" would be influenced by the particular "form" of Tillich's existential-biblical "system." One would suppose that he would be much better off had he frankly developed the idea that theological insights might act as guiding hypotheses or models throwing some light potentially on such a closely related field as metaphysics. In practice this is what I find Tillich doing. In practice substance and form are *dynamic polarities* for him—just as philosophy and theology are. He uses, for example, his ideas about the Eternal as a perspective on an existential phenomenological discussion of the meaning of human finitude. Likewise his concern with forgiveness and "the Christ" inform or bring into intelligible focus his description of existential estrangement — a focus different — for example, from that of Heidegger. That this is his approach in practice is seen clearly in his statement that the New Testament "picture of Jesus as the Christ contradicts the marks of estrangement which we have elaborated in the analysis of man's existential predicament. This is not surprising since the *analysis* was partly dependent on the confrontation of man's existential predicament with the image of the New Being in the Christ."<sup>14</sup> Having admitted such a marked and central influence within his system, Tillich has to be satisfied in volume three of the *Theology* to maintain a margin of independence for philosophy: (1) philosophy can spawn its own "theological element" and (2) theology need not necessarily "claim control" over discursive thought.<sup>15</sup> Again it seems to me that one can learn more from his practice than from his attempts at theoretical justification. Because of this I do not think Holmes is correct in claiming that "Tillich's theology is the result of theological preconceptions rather than of phenomenological description" (p. 166).<sup>16</sup>

For his part, I suspect that Tillich would find Holmes' theological

13. *Ibid.*, p. 15 (see Holmes, pp. 168-9)

14. *Ibid.*, p. 125-6 (emphasis added)

15. *S. T.* III, pp. 202-3

16. In correspondence Dr. Holmes has indicated that his real point is that it is impossible for Tillich or anyone else to put forth philosophic formulations and phenomenological descriptions without the influence of underlying preconceptions and theological perspectives. I certainly agree. And I think Tillich can, too, without admitting the complete dicotomy which the quote from Holmes implies.

"substance" too static and abstract for his liking. Tillich could ask Holmes whether he isn't putting too much "patristic form" into the material of his message when he talks about Jesus Christ as a "metaphysical hypostatic union" (p. 169). How does that arise out of a phenomenological description without preconceptions? Perhaps this is a thought-form that Holmes will have to "tamper" with or at least restate if he is to fulfill the objective which he shares with Tillich: to recast and rethink theology so that it will speak to men today (p. 169).<sup>17</sup>

Holmes raises important questions about the virtue of appealing to Jesus as the Christ as a "classical example" criterion for doing "critical phenomenology." The issues he discusses are really two: (1) the Christ-event cannot be accepted by the non-Christian phenomenologist and therefore does not provide a *universal* criterion, and (2) the "for-me" character of existentialist theology pushes it toward *subjectivity* and away from propositional and historically grounded truth statements for stating and evaluating one's phenomenological findings (p. 165).

On the first issue I suppose that one might argue that the non-Christian phenomenologist might "accept" the "classical example" in much the same way in which a Christian might make a phenomenological analysis of Buddha's Enlightenment without becoming a Buddhist. But I have problems with phenomenological "bracketing" at this point and also with Tillich's insistence on "participative knowledge" as distinguished from what I would call "understanding." For the most part, then, I am inclined to underscore Holmes' statement that Tillich can not claim universality for this "classic example" and to note Holmes' admission that phenomenology has always had difficulty in establishing universally valid conclusions. Tillich frankly admits that the theologian has to stand within his "circle of faith."

What I really fail to see is why Holmes should say that this "classic example" of revelation is "ill-chosen" (p. 165), however much he and I might wish to differ with Tillich's interpretation of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Is this not the central event of the Christian faith?<sup>18</sup> Can it not be stated propositionally and does it not have for the Christian existential and critical metaphysical-disclosure-value? I am also not convinced that Tillich moves beyond the "for-me" char-

17. In his letter to me Holmes makes it clear that he did not intend to adopt a Greek metaphysic but simply to show that Tillich's Christology fell short of any formulation of orthodox theology. "One of the major undone tasks for evangelical theology today, is the recasting of Chalcedonian theology in non-Chalcedonian language. This calls for an alternative metaphysical framework, or else for an indigenous theology devoid of any philosophical forms (an alternative I think impossible by virtue of the nature of both language and theological thought)."

18. Actually neither Holmes nor I would be satisfied with a purely existential understanding of Peter's confession—as simply a faith-event normative for all "Peters." The question we both raise is whether Tillich's "classic example" rests in the historical Incarnation which is revelatory propositionally as well as existentially.

acter of phenomenological understanding *just* "by extrapolation" (p. 165). Tillich and Holmes both admit that their differing interpretations of the phenomenological evidence are "chosen, not proven" (p. 171). Indeed, I should think that a phenomenological analysis would show that interpretations are both *given* (received) and *chosen*. Both men, I suspect, would have to simply agree to differ or else try to argue out their respective positions in terms of what I would call their "relative explanatory power." We get some examples of the way Tillich would want to do this in his Columbia University Bampton lectures (1961), *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions*, and his discussions of "History and the Kingdom of God" also include a "logos-determined explanation" of his "daring courage" to find in the Kairos-event the center of history.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, there is considerable evidence to show that he took seriously the phenomenological *test*. "The test of a phenomenological description is that the picture given by it is *convincing*, that it can be seen by anyone who is willing to look in the same direction, that the description illuminates other related ideas, and that it makes the reality which these ideas are supposed to reflect understandable."<sup>20</sup>

On the second issue I find myself in agreement with Holmes in wanting to make a case for propositional truth *as well as* the existential truth of revelation. I have argued elsewhere that it is not enough to ask how religious symbols "point beyond" in a mystical-ontological fashion or even to ask only what they "point up" for me as a sinner needing divine grace. What I am never quite sure of in Tillich is what his symbols "point from"—what historical, cultural and exegetical contest.<sup>21</sup> That uncertainty becomes increasingly serious in volume three when he wants to make his case for the biblical faith providing a truly "historical type" of interpretation of history. As a crucial starting point for a Christian interpretation of history and for Christian theology what is needed is not just "conceptual meaning-in-itself" (Holmes, p. 165), but an exegetical determination of what the "existential meaning" was for a specific past with all of its cultural aspects and implications: "for-

19. *S. T.* III, pp. 367ff. and 337. Cf. his work with the agape principle as the criterion for ethics in *Morality and Beyond*, Harper, 1963.

20. *S. T.* I, p. 106.

21. "Bultmann, Tillich, and the American Response," *Christianity Today*, December 8, 1961, pp. 22-23. Worthy of attention is *Jesus of Nazareth* by the post-Bultmannian Gunther Bornkamm (Harper, 1960). He finds in the Synoptics an "incontestable loyalty and adherence to the word of Jesus, and at the same time an astonishing degree of freedom as to the original wording. The word of Jesus is preserved, and yet not with the piety of an archivist, nor is it passed on like the utterances of famous rabbis with expositions attached . . . it is his word today." (p. 17). Bornkamm sees the records as an interpretation of the whole person and mission of Jesus by the early Church in "terms of his resurrection and the experience of his presence." (p. 20). Yet at the same time he wants to say that "the Gospels are a rejection of myth" (p. 23) and are "brim full of history" (p. 26). Cf. Tillich's "Theology and Symbolism" in *Religious Symbolism*, ed. F. E. Johnson, Harper, 1955, p. 112.

Moses", "for-Isaiah", "for-Paul". Kierkegaard and Tillich might very well say that these are historical questions which involve probabilities, rather than the "existential certainties," of a "for-me" faith, but, these questions are a part of the *total* theological enterprise nonetheless. One would suppose that the existential versus the historical (and Holmes' "for-me" versus "in-itself") would at least take on a dynamic polar character in a phenomenological approach. Faced with a particular exegetical task, Tillich might on occasion demythologize and still find some nuance of meaning in religious symbols which he could work into a sermon! Holmes wants us to find the "trans-historical revelatory significance" (p. 165), but I am not clear what he means by that. (Are ideas trans-historical?)<sup>22</sup> For me the problem would be to try to state conceptually and propositionally what seem *to me* to be the "for-Isaiah" or "for-Paul" truths in terms of the total cultural, linguistic, and hence, past-existential context. This would have to include a concern for the *process* of divine self-revelation and with what these "past-existential truths" mean "for-me" in my Christian and philosophical outlook in my "present-existential situation." Tillich might well classify my approach as an "exegetical positivism", but to me it is a necessary extension of his own concern for revelation coming in objective contexts—"for someone and in a concrete situation of concern" (Holmes, p. 165). It is an extension of his "objective existentialism" to the biblical past and it is wide open to the consideration of the pasts of Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and Barth which Tillich himself has tried to take into account as a philosophical theologian. The over-all impact should be the one which Holmes states so well as his conclusion: cognitive adequacy and disclosure-value united and grasped in terms of "the mighty acts of God in history and supremely in Christ" (p. 171).

### III. Phenomenology in Holmes and Tillich

In his paper Holmes has illustrated for us a bit of his own skill as a phenomenologist. I am at his debt for making me think through this particular approach to Tillich. I am prepared to accept his forceful conclusion that all human language including religious truth-judgments entails the "operation of *both* existential and more traditional theoretic factors" (p. 171). Now I would be interested in having him tell me just how different his own "existentialist phenomenology" is from that of Tillich. The excellent statement at the top of page 171 leads me to suppose that both would agree concerning the objective formulated by Holmes as a starting point. Phenomenology aims at a "methodical examination of conscious human existence" where "consciousness" is understood to be a "structured historical existent in lived relationships with its world" (p. 163). As far as Tillich's attainment of this goal is

22. Again in correspondence Holmes writes, "Yes, I think ideas can be trans-historical in their abiding significance for men. Hence we have major *world-viewish* traditions that survive the changing schemes in which they have been expressed."

concerned, the paper has warned us to watch the *use* made of the phenomenological data, to watch for the presence of controlling theological *preconceptions*, and to beware of a one-sided stress on the *disclosure* as distinguished from the cognitive aspect. I have given my comments on all three of these points. I am interested in what "principles" or criteria of self-evaluation (p. 164) his own phenomenological method has to offer. If Tillich is right in denying that phenomenology itself can give us these principles,<sup>23</sup> where then does Holmes get his? Also, does phenomenology have an aversion toward more scientific forms of explanation, and if so would this mean that Holmes' "principles" and Tillich's "classic example" cannot really be treated as guiding hypotheses by the philosopher as I have tried to recommend? Are we then thrown back on an empiricism which tries to "read off" from the lived-world the "pure descriptions" of phenomenology? I do not get that impression from Tillich not only because he had his "critical example" but because he had a *cognitive* emphasis at the root of his philosophical theology.

I suspect that Holmes has pushed his criticism of Tillich on the matter of "conceptual content" (p. 168) too far. It is a strange criticism when many have complained that he is "too theoretical"! If Tillich's idea of the truth of revelation were not cognitive, conceptual, and understandable, how could we account for the *Systematic Theology*? The answer is to be found in part in the fact that Tillich's symbols *do* have a public and conceptual dimension. The central symbol of the "classic example" is not an "exclusively private and existential affair"—it is, as I indicated at the start, a "for us" as well as a "for-me". Holmes is right in raising a question about the "enduring conceptual content" (p. 168) of Tillich's symbols and about the adequacy of his view of the relationship between historical events and existential meanings. Tillich would admit that if the theologian's religious "encounter changes, some of the symbols also will change—some of them might even die." In the same discussion Tillich adds that "theology deals with religious symbols by conceptualization, explanation, and criticism".<sup>24</sup> These certainly are tasks of *philosophical* theology and they bear out Holmes' later admission (p. 170) that "analogy and symbol *are* proper vehicles of rational meaning." This is one area where Tillich has tried and, ac-

23. S. T. I, 107. Holmes' more recent *Pacific Philosophical Forum* (V, May 1967, chapter 4, part 2) essay on "Philosophy and Religious Belief" makes clear certain inadequacies of the phenomenological method. It is not self-sufficient because it has to import guiding images, including religious ones. It is not sufficient because it needs to be supplemented even though it offers a larger (existential) empirical perspective than purely scientific kinds of explanation. Holmes adopts a "world-viewish perspective" that is "given" in biblical revelation and the Christ-event. Yet, he believes, the *philosopher* seeks to apply these revealed insights to a wide range of empirical material and to philosophic — as distinguished from religious — questions.

24. *Religious Symbolism, op. cit.*, p. 111

ording to his own expectations at least, apparently not failed. His cognitive and phenomenological aim was clear from the beginning: "theology must apply the phenomenological approach to all its basic concepts, forcing its critics first of all to see what the criticized concepts mean and also forcing itself to make careful descriptions of its concepts and to use them with logical consistency, thus avoiding the danger of trying to fill in logical gaps with devotional material."<sup>25</sup> This is a part of his "richer conception of reason" too, and it is a part which we can afford to take with existential seriousness.

Central College

Pella, Iowa

25. *S. T. I*, p. 106