

# **Polarities in Tillich's Thought on Revelation in the World Religions**

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## Polarities in Tillich's Thought on Revelation in the World Religions

On the one hand, Paul Tillich argued for the decisiveness, indeed, the finality of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. On the other hand, Tillich held that the ultimate is revealed in every culture, every major world religion, often in ways that can enlighten Christians engaged in interreligious dialogue. To put it humorously, Tillich might be labeled the "prince of polarities" or the "duke of dialectics." In this paper I will explore the above polarity and apparent tension of Christocentric finality versus openness to revelation from other world religions. In so doing I will utilize other Tillichian polarities, especially preparatory -- final revelation and absolute universality -- concrete particularity.

In "The Reality of Revelation" in Volume 1 of the Systematic Theology, Tillich offers some strong words about the decisiveness of final revelation in Jesus as the Christ: "Final revelation means the decisive, fulfilling, unsurpassable revelation, that which is the criterion of all the others" (133). In general a final revelation for a believer is "critical with respect to other revelations" (117). For the believer in a final revelation, any other revelations are subsumed under the category of "preparatory" for Tillich. One can believe in only one final revelation at a given time. Other revelations can prepare one to accept the final revelation,

but any other revelation must always be evaluated in light of the unsurpassibility of the final revelation. Indeed, "the Christian Church has lost its foundation," if another point of reference besides Jesus Christ is "sought or accepted" (132-33). Moreover, Jesus as the Christ, insofar as it is final revelation, is universally valid (1:107, 137; 2:151).

It has been said, "what theologians give you with the right hand, they take back with the left." Though Tillich writes strong words about the absoluteness of final revelation, we dare not forget Tillich's famous Protestant Principle. If final revelation is critical of other revelations, there is also a sense for Tillich in which a genuine final revelation must be critical of itself as well. A proper religious symbol should point to the absolute but not absolutize itself, represent the ultimate but not identify itself with the ultimate. A revelation can be universal only as it negates its finite particularity. For Tillich Jesus as the Christ is final revelation only as he surrenders or negates himself as a particular finite individual. As Tillich puts it in Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religion:

It is a personal life, the image of which, as it impressed itself on his followers, shows no break in his relation to God and no claim for himself in his particularity. What is particular in him is that he crucified the particular in himself for the sake of the universal ..... With this image, particular yet

free from particularity, religious yet free from religion, the criteria are given under which Christianity must judge itself and, by judging itself, judge also the other religions and quasi-religions (81-82).

Similar to a symbol, a religion is genuinely revelatory only as it negates itself as a particular religion. In the Systematic, Tillich pens:

The unconditional and universal claim of Christianity is not based on its superiority over other religions. Christianity, without being final itself, witnesses to the final revelation. Christianity as Christianity is neither final nor universal. But that to which it witnesses is final and universal. (1:134)

More generally, more simply, and more bluntly, Tillich declares in Encounter, "... a particular religion will be lasting to the degree in which it negates itself as a religion. Thus Christianity will be a bearer of a religious answer as long as it breaks through its own particularity" (97).

Clearly for Tillich the revelatory effectiveness of a symbol or religion banks upon the relationship between particularity and universality. Regarding the tension between concreteness and universality in general, Tillich indicates in the Systematic that it can be reduced in one of two ways: 1) finding a common denominator among examples, which results in abstraction and empty generality or 2) uniting absolute concreteness and absolute universality which results in,

indeed is, final revelation (1:107). In Encounter Tillich inveighs against religion as abstraction: that none of the typological polar elements “are ever completely lacking in any genuine experience of the holy ... does not mean that a fusion of the Christian and the Buddhist idea of God is possible, nor does it mean that one can produce a common denominator by depriving symbols of their concreteness” (67).

We have seen that Tillich believes his understanding of Jesus as the Christ preserves particularity, while at the same time negating particularity insofar as it would claim any ultimacy for itself as finite and particular. Does Tillich pull it off? In an age that many call “postmodern,” particularity is demanding its due more loudly than in Tillich’s day. When Tillich characterizes the bearer of final revelation as sacrificing its finitude, he indicates that it must possess itself completely and possess “unity with the ground of his being and meaning without separation and disruption” (1:133). Furthermore, Tillich indicates that Jesus’ individuality is always expressed with his universal significance (2:151). Thus, Tillich is not suggesting that said bearer lose its personality in a mystical absorption or undifferentiation. (Even in sacrificing his life, the personal element of Jesus is not lost in Eternal Life in Tillich’s scheme.) Yet I admit I am somewhat uncomfortable with Tillich’s rendering of his solution. To speak of Jesus’

Christhood as consisting primarily of his refusal to claim ultimacy himself, epitomized in his willingness to be crucified, is an abstraction that understates the constellation of historical particularities that enabled Jesus' life and death to become revelatory. After all, various martyrs have sacrificed their lives for the sake of the ultimate without claiming ultimacy for themselves. Though Tillich acknowledges in theory Jesus' continuity with a particular historical community as a necessary dimension of his reception as the Christ (2:117; see also, 1966:84-85), Tillich's Christology is more a modern Alexandrian than an Antiochian one. It is a via negativa rather than a positive way of describing how particularity/particularities can be revelatory.

In addition, when Tillich talks of typological polar elements (personal-transpersonal, mystical-ethical and their off shoots) as configured in a special way in any living religion, he may again undervalue concrete particularity: "Therefore, the decisive point in a dialogue between two religions is not the historically determined, contingent embodiment [emphasis his] of the typological elements, but these elements themselves" (1963:57).

Yet, while Tillich may not grant the concrete its adequate due for my and other's "postmodern" sensibilities, I agree with Tillich that there are common structural elements in the universe, human experience, and human experience of

the holy (1963:57). The concrete can reveal truth about the universal and ultimate. That there are various typological polar elements to be discerned in particular configurations in different world religions is still a valid and fruitful idea. And Tillich is correctly historicist in noting that such configurations within Christianity or any living religion vary in different historical periods (1963:56).

The foregoing discussion brings us to the question of how accurate and fair are Tillich's typological analyses of various world religions. In brief, I judge that Tillich did succumb to certain stereotypes common to his time, not giving full justice to the complex particularities of non-Christian religions and their various strands. Of course, Tillich does somewhat cover himself with the general declamation that none of the polar elements is ever completely lacking in any living religion. Yet his generalizing about non-Christian religions often leaves us no particular sense of how a non-dominant element is in fact present at all. Thus, I sense a need to critique, update, and expand Tillich's analyses based on the increased knowledge of world religions available today.

Tillich characterizes Hinduism only in passing, as a "radical asceticism," which has grown out of a basic attitude that ultimate fulfillment comes from salvation from reality (1963:73). Now it is true that liberation from samsara is the ultimate goal in the advaita and bhakti strands, though not of rural folk Hinduism.

But even in those strands there are strong countervailing tendencies. In continuity with its primal and archaic roots, as well as consistent with what Tillich calls its emphasis on the typological element of identity with nature (1963:69), many have noted Hinduism's biological flavor. Even its vaunted asceticism is complex and paradoxical: asceticism in the Hindu tradition is often a means to preserve and enhance power for creative purposes (including sexual ones).

Of the non-Christian religions, Tillich of course had a special interest in Buddhism. Chapter 3 of Encounter is entitled, "A Christian-Buddhist Conversation." Yet Tillich is influenced by stereotypes here, too. He is aware of a difference in attitude toward nature and the world in Theravada versus Mahayana Buddhism (70). Nevertheless, he generalizes that in Buddhism, as in Hinduism, "salvation from reality is the basic attitude" (73). I do agree that such is the basic attitude in Theravada historically. But Nagarjuna's Mahayana dictum that "Samsara is Nirvana" and "Nirvana is Samsara" can hardly be squared with such a world-denying characterization. Tillich also opines that, in contrast to Christianity (and other Western religions), for "Buddhism the fact that there is a world is the result of an ontological Fall into finitude" (65). That is true about Theravada's interpretation of codependent origin: desire (tanha) is the driving force behind samsara. But in Mahayana, Nirvana, sunyata, or the Buddha-nature is commonly



understood to be the formless source of all forms. Then codependency and interconnectedness become not an impetus for "ultimate detachment" as Tillich puts it (73), but for relative detachment and proper attachment: one is freed from selfish attachment to one's own (imagined) separate self and freed for compassion for all. In the Mahayana vision, particulars do not lose their reality or value -- rather how we perceive them is transformed. Tillich further indicates that Buddhist compassion, stemming from the pole of identity, lacks the will to transform (71-73). Yet the purpose of the Bodhisattva is precisely to transform, to help enlighten others, to enable them to change their perspective on the universe. Buddhist compassion could open to the will to transform society. True, one struggles to find historical examples besides Buddhism's rejection of the caste system and King Asoka's reign. But then one strains to find historical examples of Christian agape attempting to fundamentally transform society before the modern period.

Finally, in Tillich's analyses of non-Christian religions, Islam get short-shrift as a simplified religion attractive to primitives (1963:22, 37, 87).\*

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- On a more positive note, Tillich indicates in his final speech, that Islam's lack of emphasis on sin taken in conjunction with the Christian emphasis on it "can enlarge our understanding of man." (1966:93-94).

Tillich does note that Islam "absorb(ed) large elements of the ancient culture" (37), one gets no sense of the complexity and richness of Islamic philosophy and theology and of Sufi mysticism. While Tillich was and is correct that Islam has not taken on a self-critical attitude analogous to the segments of Christianity influenced by the Enlightenment (1963:95), there are in Muslim philosophy, theology, and mysticism both examples of and resources for self-criticism, as well as a contemporary growing minority interested in interreligious dialogue.

Before leaving Islam, I will comment on Tillich's claim that Christianity became radically exclusivistic as a result of its encounter with and need to defend itself against Islam (1963:37-39). Of course, sweeping generalizations with minimal citation of specific evidence are part of what endears us to Tillich's prodigious mind. And I am no expert on the relevant medieval history. But as an amateur I would ask two questions: 1) Was Islam any significant threat to Christian Western Europe following Charles Martel's victory in 732? 2) If not, don't we need other explanations for a supposedly growing exclusivism that culminated in the Crusades (which became politically and militarily feasible only with the rise of nation states)?

While Tillich attempts to explain and perhaps excuse the history of Christian exclusivism with respect to other world religions, he notes and is clearly

sympathetic with the more universalistic and inclusivistic facets of Christian history. He cites the patristic notion of the universal Logos present in all cultures - providing "preparatory revelation" in the terminology of the Systematic (1:34ff) and chides Barth and his followers for abandoning this universalistic Logos tradition (1963:46).

Yet in terms of John Hick's now familiar exclusivism - inclusivism - pluralism triumvirate, the openness of this Logos tradition was at best inclusivism and at worst a kinder and gentler exclusivism. But I will argue that Tillich is best understood as a pluralist, both on the basis of the logic of his system and of explicit remarks regarding Christianity's proper relationship to other world religions.

First of all, I will consider the logic of Tillich's dialectical understanding of final revelation. Crucial for Tillich is that neither Christianity nor any other religion is ever final nor even superior in itself -- it can only witness to the final revelation (Systematic Theology: 1:134-35). Furthermore, the revelation of Jesus as the Christ in not claiming absoluteness for itself does not claim finality in itself -- it is final only insofar as it points to or witnesses to the absolute. As Tillich indicates, the Christian believer is not looking for, is not existentially open to, a supercessionary revelation; for the believer has found final revelation in Jesus

Christ. On the other hand, Tillich's system is totally permissive of the possibility that another believer from another religious tradition has found a different final revelation. The fundamental criterion -- foregoing the claim to absoluteness for itself while pointing to the absolute -- is an inherently pluralistic one. In "The Reality of the Christ," Tillich addresses the -- for him -- real possibility that future human beings might be cut off from the historical tradition in which Jesus appeared as the Christ (2:100). For Tillich, there are different historical traditions in which in theory final revelation may appear.

One might ask if Tillich's final lecture, printed in The Future of Religions, calls into question my above characterization of Tillich's system. In it, Tillich uses the term "Religion of the Concrete Spirit" to refer to a religious moment where the mystical and ethical poles are united in a sacramental manifestation of the Holy (1966:86-87). This may be understood as another way of describing final revelation. Of course, for Christians the "appearance of Jesus as the Christ" is "the decisive victory in this struggle" of the polar elements to find a united expression (1966:88). Yet here again Tillich opines that the Religion of the Concrete cannot be identified with any actual religion, even Christianity (1966:87). Indeed, it is realized only fragmentarily in Christian history (1966:88-89). At the same time, Religion of the Concrete Spirit happens fragmentarily in

other religions "not historically or empirically connected with the [event of the] cross" (1966:89).

At the beginning of this lecture, Tillich states an assumption that could imply that one manifestation of Religion of the Concrete Spirit could have an objective superiority to all others:

there may be -- and I stress this, there may be -- a central event in the history of religions which unites the results of these critical developments in the history of religion in and under which revelatory experiences are going on -- event which, therefore, makes possible a concrete theology that has universal significance (1966:81).

Since Tillich clearly believes that final revelation has happened for Christians, I would interpret this remark to raise the possibility that all major world religions might someday regard one particular event as final revelation (from Tillich's perspective this event would hopefully be Jesus as the Christ). Under Tillich's scheme, this would entail that each of the world religions would come to regard this central event as the fulfillment of revelation in their own historical tradition; preceding revelation would then be regarded as preparatory. On the face of it, such a happening seems quite unlikely. This would explain Tillich's stress on the hypothetical nature of the possibility. Though Tillich's final speech uses some

new terminology in somewhat opaque fashion, if my interpretations are correct, it ultimately does not violate the pluralistic logic of his system.

When Tillich ventures his opinion on the proper relationship of Christianity to other world religions, he reveals a stance appropriate to a pluralist. He opposes attempts to convert, denying (again) that Christianity is an inherently or decisively superior religion (1963:56-57, 94-95). Rather, every world religion manifests the various typological elements in shifting configurations as each attempts to negotiate a proper balance for its cultural and historical context. The proper relationship is thus one of dialogue (95). Even as a religion dialogues within its own tradition in attempting to give proper due to all of the elements, it should also dialogue with other world religions for the same purpose. One might ask about the apparent discrepancy between other revelations as “preparatory” versus as dialogue partners for negotiating the typological elements. In my judgment, the difference is one of context. “Preparatory” revelation is appropriate before one has received final revelation; dialogical revelation is appropriate after reception of final revelation.

Paul Tillich’s Protestant Principle, in denying the absoluteness superiority, or finality of any revelation in itself and in advocating the necessity for any religion to dynamically negotiate the typological elements, drives him to a

pluralist position. A tension in Tillich's thought on revelation in the world religions remains. But the tension has to do with whether in actuality there have been final revelations in other world religions besides Christianity. Given Tillich's negative evaluations of various aspects of many non-Christian religions (the validity of which I have challenged), his answer may be "no," despite his position that each major world religion contains saving revelation and fragmentary manifestations of Religions of the Concrete Spirit. But in principle Tillich's system allows for multiple final revelations. And in principle and in power the apparent tension between the finality of revelation in Jesus Christ and openness to other revelation dissolves-- or at least the tension is a friendly rather than a problematic one for Tillich. At the end of Encounter, Tillich sermonizes:

In the depth of every living religion there is a point at which the religion itself loses its importance, and that to which it points breaks through its particularly elevating it to spiritual freedom and with it to a vision of the spiritual presence in other expressions of the ultimate meaning of man's existence. (97)

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