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Constructive Theology  
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## Paul Tillich

Paul Tillich dedicated his life to systematic theology and the sharing of his knowledge. Born in 1886 in Germany, to a conservative Lutheran pastor, Tillich pursued academic studies at universities of Berlin, Tübingen, and Halle before earning his Ph.D from the University of Breslau in 1910. He was ordained in the Lutheran tradition in 1912. Throughout his career, Tillich served as a pastor, military chaplain, instructor, and professor. His experience as a wartime chaplain greatly impacted his life and his theological perspective. He became vocal in his writing and advocacy of socialism in Germany. As a result, he was the first Protestant theologian the Nazis removed from a teaching position in 1933 (Carey 506); this coincided with the Nazi burning of his book, *The Socialist Decision*. Tillich emigrated to the United States the same year and continued his teaching career in theology, philosophy, and sociology. He served American schools including Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University, Harvard University, and University of Chicago's Divinity School. He died in 1965 and was buried in Indiana.

Tillich had several theological influences, which later informed his work and his teachings. His doctoral thesis was on 19th century philosopher Friedrich Schelling, whose idealism shaped Tillich's own theology (Kelsey 134). Other influences were Martin Kähler for an understanding of Luther's doctrine of justification (Carey 505), Heidegger and Kierkegaard for existentialism (Taylor), and contemporaries such as Karl Barth and Friedrich Gogarten for conversations about the "theology of crisis" (Carey 505). Tillich's writings spanned the first half of the twentieth century and invited conversations with dialogic partners such as Protestant

theology, idealist philosophy, cultural criticism, existentialism, and other religious traditions (Carey and Lienhard 506). Tillich found his voice and strongest influences on theology in the writing of his later works such as *Systematic Theology* (three volumes) (1951-63) and *The Courage to Be* (1952).

Through his writing and teaching on existentialism and systematic theology, Tillich grew to be one of the most influential Protestant theologians. He wrote more than 500 pieces, all of which developed a central theme of the interdependent relationship between “contemporary culture and historical Christianity” (Kelsey 136). Theologian David Kelsey shares that Tillich’s approach was “to show that faith need not be unacceptable to contemporary culture and that contemporary culture need not be unacceptable to faith” (136). Tillich opened the doors for Christianity to be persistently relevant across time, which invited theologians to enter the conversation and explore the impact of mediating between faith and culture. Tillich established a ‘method of correlation’ in which “the theologian’s task in its simplest terms is to correlate situation (culture) and message (Christian faith)” (Cobb 655). His ‘method of correlation’ asserted that existential questions had theological answers (Taylor). This process of correlating questions and answers required a process of systematic thinking.

Systematic thinking required Tillich to develop a complex theology that continually put life situations in conversation with Christian symbols/messages. Human beings naturally have fundamental, existential questions. Culture responds to these questions in various artistic ways while religion answers with religious symbols such as God, Jesus, or biblical stories (Kelsey 136). Tillich sets up *Systematic Theology* in five parts; each part correlates a major religious symbol as the answer to one of humanity’s existential questions. These parts include the symbol ‘Logos’ in conversation with certitude of truth; the symbol ‘God as creator’ in

conversation with finitude; the symbol 'Jesus as the Christ' in conversation with estrangement and alienation; the symbol 'Spirit' in conversation with ambiguity; and the symbol 'Kingdom of God' in conversation with meaning (Kelsey 136-137).

Tillich's systematic theology creates opportunities for rich dialogue to ensue. Theologians engage Tillich and question his christology, doctrine of God, concept of grace and sin, and his very method of correlation. Karl Barth was one of Tillich's largest critics and pushed against the concept of the method of correlation. Barth and Tillich engaged in a long, public debate regarding natural theology (Cobb 669). Theologians such as George Lindebeck, Stanley Hauerwas, and William Placher continue to take Barth's side. Tillich continues to have his supporters, too, in theologians such as Langdon Gilkey, David Tracy, Karl Rahner, John Macquarrie, and Peter Hodgson (Cobb 670).

Tillich's systematic theology creates space for ongoing conversation and has also made Christianity relevant and easy to understand for many people. His method of correlation created a pathway that demonstrated all existential questions have answers. The natural anxiety of human beings regarding *being* and the meaning of life can be posited into questions that are answered in an understanding of God and other important religious symbols. This creates a foundation upon which constructivist theologians can build new understandings and interpretations of the very religious symbols Tillich uses.

## Bibliography

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