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Paul Johannes Tillich

Paul Tillich was a philosopher and protestant theologian who was born in the village of Starzeddel in Brandenburg, Germany in 1886 and died in Chicago, Illinois in 1965.

In 1912, Tillich was ordained as a pastor by the Lutheran Church and began serving as a field chaplain during World War I, an experience that he found emotionally and spiritually shattering. (Gerard, 61-63 and Britannica.com) Following the war, he joined “the Religious-Socialist movement” which believed that the western world’s culture was approaching immanent breakdown and would thus be ripe for creative social reconstruction.

(Britannica) Tillich referred to this time period as *kairos*, which is to say that he felt it was a time in which “eternity erupts, transforming the world into a new state of being.”

While teaching at the universities of Berlin, Marburg, Dresden, Leipzig, and Frankfurt, he worked tirelessly on understanding what the new state of human nature would be. (Gerard, 61-63) Between 1919-1933, he published “more than 100 essays, articles, and reviews.” (Britannica)

Then, in 1933, his vocal opposition of the Nazi regime got him banned from German universities, a feat of which he was very proud, stating that he, “had the honor of being the first non-Jewish professor to be expelled from a German university.” (Gerard, 61-63) Tillich decided to accept an invitation from his colleague Reinhold Niebuhr to join the staff of Union Theological Seminary in New York, and moved his family overseas, and by 1963, he

was teaching at the University of Chicago and had become known as an “apostle to the skeptics.” (Gerard, 61-63)

Tillich’s experiences as a chaplain during World War I were foundational to the theologies and philosophies that he would develop in the coming years. While working with and among “dying soldiers, he often asked himself whether the God of the Bible still existed.” (Gerard, 61-63) He carried this question with him into dialogues with his university students about the meaning of human existence. (Britannica)

Two of his most famous books, *The Courage to Be* and *Dynamics of Faith* were even immensely popular with the secular audience. (Britannica) In these books, Tillich argued that it is humanity’s deepest drive to find and commune with the reality within itself that transcends its “own finite existence.” (Britannica) Tillich’s theology, which was an amalgam of the mystical tradition of apophysis, modern psychology, and philosophy, referred to that reality within as the “ground of being;” he believed that humans were “inherently connected to this transcendent ground.” One could then connect with this ground of being through various “aspects of human culture (great art, philosophy, and so forth). (Jones, 41)

Tillich was respected among his colleagues but was also, as Time Magazine stated, “better known among laymen” than “any other contemporary theologian” due to his relentless drive to “relate theology to the issues of our time.” (Gerard, 61-63) Laura Fermi in *Illustrious Immigrants*, said that Tillich and the brothers Niebuhr (Richard and Reinhold) were fundamental to the “renewal of interest in Christian thinking in America.” (Gerard, 61-63) In his dedication to making theology practically applicable, Tillich focused his much of his work and discussions on boundaries: boundaries between “country and culture,

between feudality and bureaucracy, between religion and culture, between theology and philosophy and, in a personal sense, between two continents.” (Gerard, 61-63)

Tillich was a master at correlating theology with the secular in practical and applicable ways. He infused philosophy, religion, the arts, psychology, culture, politics, and history into his writings, his teachings, his sermons, and his dialogues with both students and colleagues. For theology to remain essential to humans, Tillich felt that it must “correlate faith with culture.” (Ford, 26-27)

Tillich’s intention was always to be as his sermons were, “immediately relatable and understandable even by those who read them who do not hail from a traditional Christian setting.” (Tillich, Preface) As Tillich notes in the preface to his book *The Shaking of the Foundations*, “I should like to think that the strictly systematic character of a theology does not need to prevent it from being ‘practical’ – that is to say: applicable to the personal and social problems of our religious life.” (Tillich, Preface)

Tillich’s manner and methods are, I feel, remain perfectly suited to the “spiritual but not religious” culture in which we find ourselves in America today. Humans still yearn to be in touch with that “ground of being” within themselves, that soul, that God; but, the traditional confines of organized religion often don’t ring true in ways that are resonant for many people. Thus personal spiritualities and theologies are being developed that are compilations of various religions, cultures, philosophies, and psychologies, much like Tillich’s theological and philosophical arguments.

Works Cited

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