Paul Tillich, Being-Itself and the Structure of Vedantic Panentheism

Paul Tillich’s theological endeavour can be read as an attempt to interweave medieval German mystical notions of ‘Godhead above God’ with Biblical personalism, which according to his critics leads to an unstable product in which he seemingly vacillates between referring to the ultimate as an ‘It’ and as a ‘He’. An investigation of inter-Vedantic controversies in classical Indian thought can illuminate these Tillichian tensions. Tillich himself tried to initiate a dialogue with Eastern thought, the potential of which was not realised partly because he operated under the association of ‘Oriental mysticism’ with the ‘pantheistic’ dissolution of the human into the transpersonal ultimate. By noting certain key elements in the philosophical-theological systems of Sankara (c. 800 CE) and Ramanuja (c. 1100 CE) I note how these thinkers grappled with the notions of supra-theism and personal theism against the background of the Upanishadic theme of Being-Itself. I note the resonances between Ramanuja’s argument that the ultimate divine reality is not merely a finite self alongside, beside or with the phenomenal world but is rather its innermost personal Controller and Tillich’s insistence that God is the creative ground which embraces all reality in such a manner that the world is not external to God. Both Tillich and Ramanuja can be seen as attempting, across theological boundaries, to weave together two propositions – first, that the world is ‘internal’ to the divine (a thesis which moves their systems in the direction of ‘pantheism’) and second, that finite reality has some measure of creaturely independence (an affirmation that, unless properly balanced by the former, would lead to the alleged classical theistic picture of the world ‘outside’ a monarchical God). A comparative analysis of their theological systems can help us to highlight these tensions in Tillich’s thought between, on the one hand, his notion of the supra-personal divine which is not a mere cosmic ‘ego’ or ‘Thou’ confronting humans but includes all reality as its creative power, and, on the other hand, his development of a Biblical theism in which God encounters human persons in and through their response of faith, prayer and worship. Further, such a cross-theological investigation reveals two other issues that both thinkers grapple with in their distinctive ways – whether divine temporality is open or closed, and whether human existence can add any value to divine reality. Both Tillich and Ramanuja refuse any ‘becoming’ in the divine life if such procession entails any loss, passibility or transmutation; however, we shall note that, for reasons internal to his system, Ramanuja is seemingly more comfortable with the notion of a temporal divine even while emphasising that the divine maximally contains all value.

In short, Tillich and Ramanuja both wrestle, from within their theological locales, with highly specific forms of panentheisms, a comparative analysis of which can lead us, on this occasion, to an appreciation of the tensions that run through Tillich’s attempts to integrate ‘pantheistic’ sounding statements with those which are more reminiscent of the ‘classical theism’ that he usually opposes.

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