Tillichian Transcendentalism or the Salvation of Particularity?

Kenneth Hamilton suggests that Tillich’s conception of a Christian theologian differs radically from the traditional understanding of the term. Tillich seems to envisage a universal theological science of which Christian theology is a branch. Hamilton protests that such a theologian could be described as doing Christian theology only in the sense that an Australian anthropologist, practicing the universal principles of his science in relation to African tribal cultures, might plausibly be termed an African anthropologist. In my paper I investigate the theological and epistemological grounds for such a protest.

For Tillich, the New Being in Christ has revelatory finality as the perfect reunion of a human life with its grounding power. However the Christ-event is not unique in kind, but only unsurpassable in degree. Because Tillich’s symbolic dialectics dictate a distinction between revelatory content and form, Jesus per se is not the unique revelation of the humanity of God. His uniqueness is negated as merely the vehicle for a manifestation of eternal truth, a truth accessible independently of any historical exemplification. Tillich remains on Lessing’s side of the ‘ugly broad ditch’ between rational necessity and historical truth. The scandal of particularity is sacrificed as Jesus’ individuality is surrendered to the unfolding of an a priori ontology. Tillich works under the compulsion of a dialectical theorising which dictates that the finite actuality of the man, Jesus of Nazareth, must be negated in order that an ultimate, concrete-universal revelation may be manifested symbolically as ‘the Christ’. In fact Tillich goes so far as to say that a successful historical critical challenge to the particular identity of the bearer of the new being would not affect the existential truth of a faithful reception of Christic revelation, since the history of the church as a community in reception of the New Being is evidence that the eternal healing of existential estrangement truly shone through some man’s finitude, whoever he might have been.

I argue that a surrender of Jesus’ revelatory and salvific uniqueness is the inevitable result of Tillich’s attempt to conform Christian theology to a set of transcendental, aprioristic experiential presuppositions. I suggest that Tillich’s re-assuring apologetic succeeded in the mid-twentieth century precisely because it did not transgress the structure of the story that modernity was already telling itself. Tillich artificially sweetens that story, while his ontology secures it from within, insulating it from the unsettling challenge of a truly revelatory in-breaking of transcendence.

Daniel Plant: I have recently gained my PhD in philosophical theology (King's, London, 2013). I have an interest in Tillich's thinking going back over ten years, an interest that has strangely mutated from strong support to strong objection, in light of my own research into revelation and philosophical apriorism (my thesis addressed the role of imagination in the work of Kierkegaard and S T Coleridge).