The Need for Paul Tillich’s Method in Theological Bioethics

In the field of bioethics, religious voices, and particularly Protestant voices, are often lost in secular debates. According to religious critics, theological views are either too radical to be taken seriously or too affirming to offer real critique. Insofar as liberal theology has not taken a contentious stand toward science, it might be in the best position to speak to its distinct vision for human life. Liberalism’s strength, however, also puts it at risk for becoming attenuated, subordinated or even obliterated by the medical sciences it wishes to defend. While liberal theologians, and process thinkers in particular, have heavily critiqued the dualistic nature of medicine, they have often been too quick to applaud medicine’s move toward holistic alternatives. Liberal theologians have sought to protect theology against the claims that it cannot cope with modern science. While rightly claiming that the secular sciences can only discredit a God whose existence humans thought that they could prove, liberal theologians have often been too quick to find similarities between its own understanding of the spiritual dimension with medicine’s pathetic attempts to integrate (and dominate) the spiritual realm. A theological metaphysics, which understands God as the ground of being, conflicts with the metaphysical assumptions upon which medicine is based. As medicine continues to absorb the “spiritual” into its schemes, liberal Protestants must guard against allowing medicine to subtly redefine the good life.

In the following paper, I will illuminate how the theology of Paul Tillich is uniquely suited to help liberal Protestants regain a voice in the field of bioethics. During his lifetime, Tillich consistently wrote and preached about the need for total health and collaboration amongst healers, as well as culture’s value-laden obsession with technological progress. While he demanded that the theologian be conversant in science, Tillich refused to allow scientific discovery dictate or confirm the truth of faith. I believe that Tillich would be much more critical of the recent attempts by medicine to view “spirituality” as a coping mechanism to be assessed and manipulated within the clinical context.

Within Tillich’s work, I will highlight three particular themes that I expect will help contextualize the Protestant principle within the field of health care. First, I will show how Tillich’s “correlational” theology informs his understanding of the proper relationship between religion and science. Second, I will explore how Tillich’s theology of culture carves out a space for contemporary theologians to perform a critical analysis of current medical practices. Finally, I will survey how Tillich connects spirituality, health, and the healing profession within his vision of a theonomous culture. In all this, I hope to show how Tillich’s method of engaging the medical sciences, along with his particular metaphysical claims, can be instructive for Protestant bioethics. Nearly half a century later, Protestant theologians need to engage issues and trends in health care with the same verve.

Devan Stahl, M.Div. is a doctoral candidate at Saint Louis University. She will soon complete her dissertation, “Genes, Genesis and Genetic (Well) Being: Challenging the Metaphysics of Modern Genetic Medicine,” which critically examines the Human Genome Project using the theological method of Paul Tillich.