PAUL TILLICH'S SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

Irving Hexham*

The great achievement of Paul Tillich was the coherent meaning that he gave to "religious language." His genius can only be fully realized when we have understood what he is seeking to do in his profusion of theological works. To grasp this basic understanding we must see that his whole enterprise rests on a particular philosophical approach to the world. This approach is closely related to his theory of discourse, which is very similar to Wittgenstein's "language game" theory.

In his discussion of "Verification and Truth" in his *Systematic Theology*[1] Tillich points out various weaknesses in the principle of verification. He argues that truth must ultimately rest upon "what is"—that is, reality. This, he says, necessitates an appeal to the life process itself. Experiments that apply the verification principle presuppose the possibility of isolation, but life itself is complex. Therefore we can only verify separable elements within life. Other elements, such as the tasks of physicians, psychotherapists, educators, politicians, etc., involve the totality of life and are only verifiable within the entire life process not by separating out testable parts. "Their verification is their efficacy in the life process of mankind."[2] This means that our tests of truth and falsity must be appropriate to the subject matter involved. In theology the test Tillich advocates is the "method of correlation."

Before we consider this, we must examine further his concept of appropriateness. "Method and system," he argues, "determine each other. Therefore, no method can claim to be adequate for every subject."[3] We must beware of "methodological imperialism," since what is appropriate for the science of physics may not apply to the realm of history. The objects under consideration by different disciplines will take on different meanings according to the discipline involved in considering the object.[4] Hence it would seem that the "cross of Christ" will have a theological significance for a theologian, but a biologist would view it as a piece of wood, to an engineer it could be seen as an interesting construction problem, and so on. This leads Tillich to say, "The dimension of faith is not the dimension of science, history or psychology."[5] Faith can conflict only with faith, and science

*Irving Hexham is assistant professor of religion at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg.

[1]P. Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (London: 1953), 1. 112.

[2]Ibid., p. 117.

[3]Ibid., p. 67.

[4]Ibid., p. 16.

[5]P. Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith* (London: 1957) 53.

with science. Faith and science cannot conflict with each other because they belong to different realms.

Such an understanding is closely linked to Tillich's understanding of language. Language is the product of a community and expresses the understanding of the world that the community has. Only in community can language exist, and because of this we realize "the reason for the predominant significance of the community of faith. Only as a member of such a community (even if in isolation or expulsion) can a man have content for his ultimate concern. Only in a community of language can man actualise his faith."[6] Thus community and language are interrelated.

From this we see that "faith" is simply one of many realms of life, each with its own language. As Tillich says, "Faith needs its language, as does every act of the personality."[7] We could add that physics, politics, history, etc., also need their own languages as acts of the personality. Such languages simply "grow out of the individual or collective unconscious."[8] As natural growths they only survive as long as they retain their significance within the community. Once their significance is lost they simply die.

Accepting such a position helps us to realize why science and faith cannot come into conflict. Their languages are mutually exclusive languages, as are their realms of significance. Each has its own realm and is only applicable within that realm, within the social context in which its language is used. "Religious language, the language of symbol and myth, is created in the community of believers, and cannot be fully understood outside of this community. But within it, the religious language enables the act of faith to have concrete content."[9]

This brief outline gives us the key to our understanding of Tillich's work. The entire enterprise rests on six basic concepts: (1) There are many different spheres of life. Each sphere is a self-contained realm of understanding (e.g., physics and faith). (2) Each realm has its own appropriate criteria of truth and falsity. The criteria of history will not be applicable to biology. (3) A common object may be viewed from many different angles. Each realm will see it in a different way (e.g., this writing can be seen as significant symbols or as a chemical formula). (4) Various realms have languages that are evolved by the participants within that realm. Thus the use of a language depends on the community that created and uses it. (5) Every realm has its own particular language, which is applicable only within its own realm. (6) Languages may grow or die according to the use that they find within a community.

If this analysis of Tillich's work is correct, the position so far outlined is very similar to Wittgenstein's "language games." Wittgenstein writes:

> Here the term "language game" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life. Review the multiplicity of language games in the following examples, and in others: Giving orders, and

[6]Ibid., p. 24.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ibid., p. 43.

[9]Ibid., p. 24.

obeying them. . . . Describing. . . . Forming and testing hypotheses. . . . Presenting the result of an experiment. . . . Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying.[10]

Peter Winch eleborates on the lead given by Wittgenstein when he argues that the "notion of intelligibility is systematically ambiguous. . . . [I]ts sense varies systematically according to the particular context in which it is being used."[11] This he takes to mean that the historian, the physicist and the economist, to name only three disciplines, will each have his own independent realm of study. He says, "On my view then, the philosophy of science will be concerned with the kind of understanding sought and conveyed by the scientist; the philosophy of religion . . . and so on."[12] From this he can say that it is a "mistake in principle" to compare two forms of science.[13] Using a typical Tillichian phrase he says that "ideas cannot be torn out of their context. . . .[T]he relation between idea and context is an internal one. The idea gets its sense from the role it plays in the system."[14]

The entire system that Winch elaborates is based on the idea of language as a social phenomenon. Each "language game" reflects a "form of life." Following Wittgenstein he believes that each form of life is an independent realm with its own language and rules. "What has to be accepted, the given is—so one could say—forms of life."[15]

With this type of analysis in mind D. Z. Phillips can say that the "believer must be a participant. . . . [T]o know how to use the language is to know God."[16] Such a view seems to be following Wittgenstein's dictum that "philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. . . . It leaves everything as it is." And indeed Winch, Phillips and other Wittgensteinians do seem to leave "everything as it is."[17]

Kai Nielsen[18] lists eight basic assumptions in Wittgenstein that may be compared with assumptions underlying Tillich's work:

1) The forms of language are forms of life.

2) What is given are the forms of life.

3) Ordinary language is all right as it is.

4) A philosopher's task is not to evaluate or criticise language or forms of life, but to

[10]L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: 1963) 11e.

[11]P. Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science* (London: 1958) 18.

[12]Ibid., p. 19.

[13]Ibid., p. 88.

[14]Ibid., p. 107.

[15]Ibid., p. 40; Wittgenstein, *Philosophical* 226e.

[16]D. Z. Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer* (London: 1967) 50.

[17]Wittgenstein, *Philosophical* 49e.

[18]K. Nielsen, "Wittgensteinian Fideism," *Philosophy* 42 (1967) 192.

describe them where necessary and to the extent necessary to break philosophical perplexity concerning their operation.

5) The different modes of discourse which are distinctive forms of life all have a logic of their own.

6) Forms of life taken as a whole are not amenable to criticism; each mode of discourse is in order as it is, for each has its own criteria and each sets its own norms of intelligibility, reality, and rationality.

7) These general, dispute-engendering concepts, i.e. intelligibility, reality and rationality, are systematically ambiguous; their exact meaning can only be determined in the context of a determinate way of life.

8) There is no Archimedian point in terms of which a philosopher (or for that matter anyone) can relevantly criticise whole modes of discourse or, what comes to the same thing, ways of life, for each mode of discourse has its own specific criteria of rationality/irrationality, intelligibility/unintelligibility, and reality/unreality.[19]

Phillips and others seem to understand the fourth assumption as meaning to leave "everything as it is." Wittgenstein himself went on from this to say that "the clarity we are aiming at is indeed complete clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should completely disappear."[20] The great achievement of Tillich is that in leaving "everything as it is" he achieves "complete clarity." He removes the philosophical problems that have plagued traditional theism by transmuting its language into the language of man's own self-understanding. The Wittgensteinians on the other hand have helped to increase our understanding of the language of faith but, as Phillips so well illustrates, they have not really solved any philosophical problems. Tillich's own solution to such problems may be seen in his understanding of the method of systematic theology and the concept of faith, which will now be outlined.

At the outset it is important to realize the systematic character of Tillich's thought. In being systematic he is constructing a language of faith, a realm of life, which has its own principle of verification, terminology and meaning. His system

is an attempt to use the "method of correlation" as a way of uniting message and situation. It tries to correlate the questions implied in the situation with the answers implied in the message. . . . It correlates questions and answers, situation and message, human existence and divine manifestation. . . . [S]uch a method is not a tool to be handled at will. . . . It is itself a theological assertion . . . made with passion and risk; and ultimately it is not different from the system which is built upon it. System and method belong to each other and are to be judged with each other.[21]

Because it consists of a whole realm of life, a complete language of its own, Tillich says, "Every understanding of spiritual things is circular."[22] Entrance to the

[19]Ibid.

[20]Wittgenstein, Philosophical 51e.

[21]Tillich, Systematic 7.

[22]Ibid., p. 12.

circle depends on a "mystical a priori." To enter the circle the theologian "must have made an existential decision, he must be in the situation of faith."[23] This "situation of faith" really amounts to playing the language game of faith. The language game is a coherent whole: "The doctrine of the theological circle has a methodological consequence: neither the introduction nor any other part of the theological system is the logical basis for the other parts. Every part is dependent on every other part."[24] In other words the language used is systematically ambiguous, gaining its meaning from the whole system.[25]

Tillich argues that "verification means a method of deciding the truth or falsehood of judgments."[26] In theology this method of verification, which is appropriate to the subject matter, allows "the life process itself [to] make the test."[27] This occurs when "the Christian message provides the answers to the questions implied in human existence."[28] "In using the method of correlation, systematic theology proceeds in the following way: it makes an analysis of the human situation out of which the existential questions arise, and it demonstrates that the symbols used in the Christian message are the answer to these questions."[29] So for Tillich, verification occurs in the realm of theology when answers are found in theological discourse to the questions that arise from man's existence. This union of question and answer in the living situation is for him the test of theological truth.

Examining the questions of human existence, as Tillich sees them, will now enable us to learn the terminology he uses to express the "language of faith" and to understand the meaning he gives it. Today's question is a "question of a reality in which the self-estrangement of our existence is overcome."[30] This overcoming of estrangement is basic to the understanding of his entire system. The modern world is filled with dissolution and despair. Life has lost all meaning. Theology answers this basic question of life's meaningfulness. "Only those who have experienced the shock of transitoriness, the anxiety in which they are aware of their finitude, the threat of non-being can understand what the notion of God means."[31] Theological language exists to solve today's problem, and today "man is the question he asks about himself."[32] Theology gives man meaning and purpose, it enables him to face up to an apparently meaningless existence, it gives him "the courage to be." "God is the answer to the question implied in human finitude."[33]

So Tillich argues that old symbols that spoke about a supernatural realm and that are now meaningless are to be given a new meaning. Thus Tillich successfully makes old "philosophical problems . . . completely disappear."[34] Yet at the

[23]Ibid., p. 13.

[24]Ibid., p. 14.

[25]Ibid., p. 34.

[26]Ibid., p. 113.

[27]Ibid., p. 114.

[28]Ibid., p. 72.

[29]Ibid., p. 70.

[30]Ibid., p. 55.

[31]Ibid., p. 69.

[32]Ibid.

[33]Ibid., p. 72.

[34]Wittgenstein, *Philosophical* 51e.

same time he "leaves everything as it is."[35] At this point his true genius can be clearly seen. In reinterpreting the old symbols to obtain "complete clarity" we learn that "God must be called the infinite power of being which resists the threat of non-being."[36] The old doctrine of providence is to be seen as calling "God . . . the infinite appeal of courage."[37] Other old "outdated symbols" that created problems by clashing with scientific disciplines—for example, the doctrine of creation and the scientific understanding of the origin of the earth—receive similar treatment so that the problems involved in such a clash are removed. Each realm of life is seen in its own terms while faith is freed from its difficulties. In this way the language of faith gains its own meaning free from the problems created by apparent clashes with science or philosophy. Such clashes are now to be regarded simply as misuses of language, as an old outdated "methodological imperialism."[38]

The language of faith has its own realm and rights, but because of past confusions it has been greatly misunderstood. If it was possible, Tillich would like to stop using the word "faith" altogether. But it is not, so he continues to use it but hopes to show how we use it with a new meaning.[39] "Faith," he tells us, "is the state of being ultimately concerned."[40] In the OT this is seen in the Israelites' concern for the God of justice. But although "the content matters infinitely for the life of the believer . . . it does not matter for the formal definition of faith."[41] Faith as an act of ultimate concern involves the entire personality. In faith man's being transcends the transitory. "Ultimate concern is concern about what is experienced as ultimate. In this way we have turned from the subjective meaning of faith as a centered act of the personality into its objective meaning, to what is meant in the act of faith."[42]

To a traditional believer, or even unbeliever, such words often seem unintelligible. We can only grasp their meaning if we remember that Tillich has created his own language of faith in which their meaning is to be found. This language, as has been argued, is to be understood not in terms of traditional theism but in terms of man's existence. The correctness of such an interpretation soon becomes clear. Tillich asks, "What in the idea of God constitutes divinity?" His answer: "It is the element of unconditionality and of ultimacy."[43] "The ultimate of the act of faith and the ultimate that is meant in the act of faith are one and the same."[44] Later he says, "The fundamental symbol of ultimate concern is God." To this the Christian believer can assent, but Tillich reveals his own meaning by continuing: "It is always present [i.e., the symbol of God] in any act of faith, even if the act of faith includes the denial of God."[45] He goes on to say, "He who denies God as a

---

[35]Ibid., p. 49e.

[36]Tillich, *Systematic* 72.

[37]Ibid.

[38]Ibid., p. 67.

[39]Tillich, *Dynamics*, Introduction.

[40]Ibid., p. 1.

[41]Ibid., p. 4.

[42]Ibid., p. 9.

[43]Ibid., p. 10.

[44]Ibid., p. 11.

[45]Ibid., p. 45.

matter of ultimate concern affirms God, because he affirms the ultimacy of his concern."[46]

Should any doubt still remain that Tillich is systematically translating the old and (he believes) outdated terms of traditional theism into terms about man's existence, he states: "Often people say that they are secular . . . that they are without faith! But if one asks them whether they are without . . . something which they take as unconditionally serious, they would strongly deny this. And in denying that they are without ultimate concern, they affirm they are in a state of faith. . . . [T]he fact that they are secular does not exclude them from the community of the faithful."[47] In this way Tillich is able to "prove" that all men really have "faith" whether they acknowledge it or not. His book *Dynamics of Faith* concludes with this observation: "It is the triumph of the dynamics of faith that any denial of faith is itself an expression of faith, of an ultimate concern."[48]

Through his immense labors Tillich has given the word "faith" a new lease on life in the second half of the twentieth century. He has defended his version of "Christianity," because in his understanding Christian symbols most adequately refer to "faith" against the attacks of its enemies. Thus his creation of a language of faith is probably an unparalleled achievement in the modern world.

The question remaining to be answered is this: Do evangelical Christians gain anything by accepting Tillich's system? Obviously they gain a certain freedom from attack and a meaningful language. But does it express the meaning found in Scripture that they want it to express? If we wish to claim to be descendants of Paul, Augustine, Luther or Calvin, the only answer that can be given is "no." More importantly, the study of Tillich's system will alert Christians to the ways in which religious language can be manipulated and make them cautious whenever they read a writer who seems to be saying orthodox things but somehow gives the impression of not accepting the realities of the gospel. In such cases Christians must examine the writer's system carefully to see if—as in the case of Tillich—a word game is being played that fools the unwary. If all that Tillich does is to make us sensitive to the way in which words are used and the meaning that a system of thought gives them, then in fact he has done the Church a great service and in a strange way has helped to defend orthodox Christianity.

[46]Ibid., p. 46.

[47]Ibid., p. 63.

[48]Ibid., p. 127.