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Albert Einstein and Paul Tillich

Cosmic Religious Feeling

Glenn F. Chesnut

The famous scientist Albert Einstein had spoken on “Science and Religion” at The Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion held in New York City in September 1940, strongly attacking the traditional concept of God. Tillich’s response to these arguments was published as one of the chapters in his book on the *Theology of Culture*,¹ and is especially important to look at, because it shows us one of the greatest theologians of the century responding to one of the greatest scientists of the period.

The title which Tillich gave to his response was “The Idea of a Personal God,” because he saw that this question was at the true crux of the many issues separating the theologians and the scientists. As Tillich sums up the great physicist’s position:

Einstein attacks the idea of a personal God from four angles:
[1] The idea is not essential for religion. [2] It is the creation of primitive superstition. [3] It is self-contradictory. [4] It contradicts the scientific world view.

Tillich’s response to this was very interesting, because he in fact acknowledged that he, just like Einstein, did not believe that the

ground of the universe was in fact a personal being. But against the scientist, he insisted that a certain amount of the personalistic language in the traditional Jewish and Christian prayers and texts was in fact necessary, even if it was only being intended as metaphor and analogy.

1. Spirituality cannot be reduced to only a system of humanistic ethics

The first criticism assumes, Tillich says, that religion and spirituality can be understood in a way which leaves out everything except ethical issues, which Einstein said in that speech can still be talked about meaningfully on a completely humanistic basis, with no reference to any kind of religious belief. Tillich says that this ignores the experience of what Rudolf Otto called the numinous aspect of reality and the reality of the enormous depths which we encounter when we approach the ground of all being and meaning, and the effect that has upon our moral perspective. It also assumes that a moral perspective on our personal relationships with other human beings can be constructed upon the basis of a neutral sub-personal view of the universe, which is not possible, because our scientific beliefs (when based upon this kind of foundation) depersonalize our entire view of the world and always end up undermining and negating the validity of any moral principles we then try to maintain.

2. Primitive superstitions can nevertheless refer to things that actually exist

The second criticism points to the abuse of the idea of God in previous eras of human history by primitive imaginations which converted it into ignorant and superstitious beliefs and tried to use it to justify grossly immoral behavior. As Tillich points out in his essay, the fact that an idea has been abused by some people does not mean that the underlying idea is totally invalid, and without foundation. If primitive people foolishly believed that volcanoes

were caused when the god Vulcan, the smith who made metal objects for the other gods, began hammering on his forge under the earth, and if these primitive folk out of fear then began burning sacrifices to Vulcan to try to prevent volcanoes from occurring, this does not in fact mean that volcanoes do not exist or that the ground of being does not exist. It simply meant that they had an ignorant and faulty science and an ignorant and faulty theology both. And Tillich goes further, and cites the philosopher Descartes: “the infinite in our mind presupposes the infinity itself.” Uneducated and primitive notions about the infinite ground of being does not mean that there is no infinite ground.

3. Omnipotence as symbol of an unthreatenable cosmic source of power and grace

Einstein’s third argument, that religion is self-contradictory, is directed at the often heard religious concept of “an omnipotent God who creates moral and physical evil although, on the other hand, he is supposed to be good and righteous.” But the idea of omnipotence, Tillich says, is a symbol, not a statement that God is an object who is active in terms of physical causality, as simply one object among all the other objects in the physical universe. As a religious symbol, we see the correct understanding of omnipotence in biblical passages like the famous one from Deutero-Isaiah (Tillich here cites Chapter 40 in the book of Isaiah). To put this in context, we need to remember how the ancient near east had been swept by bloodshed and slaughter over and over again for two entire centuries, as first one imperialistic power and then another sought to gain control over the entire region: the Assyrians (the Nazis of the ancient near east), the Babylonians, and finally the Persians. Through all of this the Jewish people had somehow survived, and were now going to be given the opportunity to return to Palestine and rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. The passage to which Tillich refers was written at this point, shortly after the Edict of Cyrus was issued by the King of

the Medes and the Persians (modern day Iran) in 538 B.C. Since a good many of the people who are going to read this book are not great biblical scholars, I believe it will be useful to give an extended selection from Isaiah 40, so the reader can get a better idea of what Tillich meant by the image of omnipotence as a powerful symbol for talking about the structures of reality:

A voice says, "Cry!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people is grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever.

Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in; who brings princes to nought, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

The real God is far above all the meaningless battles of ignorant kings and dictators struggling for power. The real God is the power revealed in all the countless stars and galaxies which came into being out of the infinite ground of all being in what modern physicists call the Big Bang, 13.7 billion years ago:

To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these? He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name; by the greatness of his might, and because he is strong in power not one is missing.

The symbol of divine "omnipotence" means that the force which created the galaxies can never be threatened or overthrown by puny human beings, even so-called mighty kings and world conquerors,

who are like tiny grasshoppers madly jumping about on a planet that is but a speck of dust in a universe which extends as far as the largest astronomical telescopes can peer.

After passing through any kind of historical cataclysm, however, this passage from Isaiah proclaims that human beings can turn to the realm of the sacred and the infinite, and draw power and grace to rebuild their lives. If Solomon's Temple has been destroyed and Jerusalem lies in ruins, this does not mean the end of the people of God. They can turn to the source of all spiritual power again, just as their ancestors did in the midst of earlier historical periods of destruction and calamity, and build the Second Temple and the New Jerusalem.

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary, his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

The symbol of divine "omnipotence," Tillich says, does not refer to a mechanical system where God is purported to be a this-worldly physical cause (an object among all the other objects in the universe) who somehow or other prevents bad things from ever happening to good people, which would simply be total nonsense anyway to any human being of even moderate intelligence. It was obvious to the biblical authors too. Of course, vast numbers of innocent human beings died when the cruel Babylonian army took the city of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., and even more died during the thousand mile death march which followed, when the survivors were forced to cross the burning deserts under armed guard, to concentration camps and resettlement camps in Babylon.

As a religious symbol, omnipotence means that the word God refers to something so huge and powerful that the existence and

integrity of this infinite ground can never be threatened by anything human or earthly, no matter how cruel or evil or powerful. And it also means that God always remains as a source of power and grace and courage for finding new meaning and creating new structures of being, which can be called upon by human beings in any kind of possible situation. Tillich had had to do that during two different periods in his own life, first during the period of the First World War, and later during the period just before the Second World War when he was having to rebuild his whole life in the new country of America.

But we cannot get involved, Tillich says, in trying to argue that the sufferings of young men in the trenches of the First World War, lying maimed or blinded and screaming in fear and pain, were the direct causal result of a decision made by some imaginary God. And theology turns into nonsense when we try to use logical trickery and special pleading to insist that this cruel imaginary being could nevertheless somehow or other be construed as good and loving. As Tillich says in forceful language in his essay:

The concept of a “Personal God,” interfering with natural events, or being “an independent cause of natural events” makes God a natural object beside others, an object amongst objects, a being amongst beings, maybe the highest, but anyhow a being No criticism of this distorted idea of God can be sharp enough.

4. A supra-personal ground of being does not contradict the scientific world view

On Einstein’s fourth criticism, that belief in a personal God contradicts the scientific world view, Tillich quotes the physicist against himself, and then makes a careful and important distinction (absent from the scientist’s talk) between the personal, the sub-personal, and the supra-personal. Einstein said that there was a kind of religious perspective, if one wished to call it that, which could be held within the modern scientific world view, without contradicting

any of the fundamental principles of science. A man or woman who held that kind of scientific religious perspective “attains that humble attitude of mind towards the grandeur of reason incarnate in existence, which, in its profoundest depths, is inaccessible to man.” But in these words, Tillich says, Einstein is admitting all of the basic underlying assumptions of a good and authentically traditional theology.

If I interpret these words rightly they point to a common ground of the whole of the physical world and of superpersonal values, a ground which, on the one hand, is manifest in the structure of being (the physical world) and meaning (the good, true, and beautiful) — which, on the other hand, is hidden in its unexhaustible depth. Now, this is the first and basic element of any developed idea of God from the earliest Greek philosophers to present day theology.

Since humanistic values emerge when intelligent minds come into contact with the ground of being and the infinite depths of reality — something which Einstein held at the heart of his own belief and tried to act on in his own activities as an opponent to the cruel and inhuman Nazi view of the world — we must say that the ground of being is *higher* than the personal (not *lower*) because, though not personal itself, the ground of being has the power to give rise to personal values involving the entire sphere of goodness and beauty. Furthermore, Tillich points out that when Einstein refers to both the “grandeur” of the divine Logos (Reason Itself) which is “incarnate in existence” and also to the “profoundest depths” of this incarnation which are “inaccessible to man,” he himself admits that “the manifestation of this ground and abyss of being and meaning creates what modern theology calls ‘the experience of the numinous.’” Einstein himself in fact *knows* and *acknowledges* that the grandeur and the sense of infinite depths, along with the wonder and awe which these arouse, are all really there. They are not imaginary. And this, Tillich points out, is what Rudolf Otto called the awareness of the numinous, and this in turn means that religious

language (properly understood) is not as foolish as Einstein would have us believe.

The need for symbolic language and metaphor

We cannot talk literally about the infinite without falsifying its infinite qualities, so there are few (if any) fully literal statements which we can make about the divine ground. St. Thomas Aquinas said that the only literal statement that we can make about God is to state that the divine ground is Being Itself, the pure act by which all other beings come to be. In his *Systematic Theology*, Tillich at first said that the only literal statement that we can make about God is that it is impossible to make any literal statements about God, but he eventually came to the position that even this statement could not philosophically qualify as a literal statement *about* God.

This creates great theological difficulty. How can we write or think intelligibly about spiritual issues, if all that we are allowed to say is that the ground of being is Being Itself, or one or two other abstract and theoretical propositions of that sort? How could we write meditations or give talks that would help people who are dealing with real spiritual problems, and may have fallen into blind panic or total despair? People who may perhaps have given up on life and are in a state of final psychological and spiritual collapse? We have to speak to these people, and try to help them.

But what kind of language is left to use? On the one hand, the ground of being itself cannot, by its very nature, be turned into an *object* for the objectifying language of normal scientific inquiry. On the other hand, speak we must, because compassion requires us to help these people if we can. “But since it is ‘inaccessible’ to any objectivating concept,” Tillich says, the idea of who and what God is “must be expressed in symbols.”

That is what all the great spiritual traditions of the earth have done at all periods of human history, that is, to build up vast repertoires of symbols and metaphors for helping people who are in great psychological and spiritual need. The psychiatrist Carl Jung has shown that these symbols are not only verbal but also visual, and

include many things with profound but deeply hidden meanings. Jung showed, for example, that the Christian cross is a universally found religious symbol called a mandala, with the same underlying kind of symbolism as that is found in the sand paintings of Tibetan Buddhism, the Chinese yin-yang symbol, the six-pointed Jewish Star of David, the five-pointed star of the American flag, and the designs used on some of the old Native American shields (as for example on some of the painted, round leather shields created by the Lakota, the Crow, and the Blackfoot tribes). If we walk into a place of worship in any religion of the world, we will hear and see hundreds of symbols and metaphors in the chants and religious phrases and sacred texts and pieces of art. All these different human religions introduce us to the great truths of spirituality and the sacred by using symbols and metaphors, because that is the only way they can speak about the real spiritual issues.

There are an incredible number of symbols used in the Judeo-Christian tradition, but Einstein's criticism (Tillich says) focused on one of these in particular, and singled it out for attack.

One of these symbols is "Personal God." It is the common opinion of classical theology, practically in all periods of Church history, that the predicate "personal" can be said of the Divine only symbolically or by analogy or if affirmed and negated at the same time.

A symbol, in Tillich's theological system, is a signpost pointing our attention to something else. But we must remember at all times that the symbol is not that to which it points. The signpost pointing our eyes towards the Grand Canyon is not itself the Grand Canyon. I prefer to use the term metaphor instead of symbol in my own theological writings, because it makes it easier to understand how so many religious texts, like the passage from Isaiah 40 which was quoted earlier, consist of vast numbers of vivid metaphors: human lives are like tiny blades of grass or like grasshoppers jumping about, but they can use the power of divine grace "to mount up with wings like eagles," to mention just a few of the colorful images used.

But my choosing to use the term metaphor instead of symbol is mostly just personal preference, because I am pointing to the same kind of religious language to which Tillich refers.

The cataphatic-apophatic method

Religious symbols and metaphors have to be analyzed by what early Christian theologians called the cataphatic-apophatic method. The Greek verb *kataphêmi* means to say yes or assent to something, so the Greek noun *kataphasis* which is derived from it means an affirmative statement. The *kata* prefix can also be added to a word to mean that whatever is being done, is being done throughout and thoroughly, from one end to the other, so this is also implied in the theological use of the term cataphatic in early Christian Greek. The other word, *apophasis*, meant negation, saying no, denying that something was true. In a paradoxical sort of way, in order for us to use religious metaphor properly, we have to do both, and say both “yes” and “no” to the contents of the symbolic elements.

When we apply the cataphatic-apophatic method to analyzing religious metaphors, we have to begin by using the cataphatic approach and discussing the internal structure of the metaphor in detail, exploring the context of its meaning if it were taken literally. So when Isaiah 40 says that the Jews who were now going to be allowed to return from the Babylonian concentration camps “shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint,” we can use the cataphatic method to discuss the eagle metaphor and try to visualize more clearly what it means to talk about eagles flying through the air, taken as a totally literal visual image. When we watch an eagle soaring overhead, we are impressed with the grace and ease and total freedom with which the eagle sweeps through the heights. The eagle’s wings are strong and capable in themselves, but the eagle also knows how to use them to ride the powerful air currents in the upper atmosphere, and be borne upwards even further. Above all, the eagle is lifted up above the creatures who creep and crawl and hop upon the surface of the earth, and can

ignore their petty battles and concerns. Eagles do not bother themselves about tiny grasshoppers fighting for the same blade of grass.

But then, to appropriate the metaphor for spiritual purposes, we must use the apophatic method, and make it clear that when we are reading the Bible, we are not studying a biological textbook about the habits of eagles. We must see how to apply the metaphor to our own lives. The higher meaning of the metaphor is a message about freedom, rising to new heights, receiving an exuberant new power, and being able to leave behind all the old earthly constraints which had us crawling miserably through the rocks and thorns of existence. But this higher meaning has to be grasped intuitively, and cannot itself be put literally into words, because as the reader can see, all I really did in the preceding sentence was to use a different set of metaphors in the attempt to illuminate the meaning of the eagle metaphor. Freedom vs. being locked up, high vs. low, references to “the rocks and thorns of existence,” and so on, are also metaphors and not literal statements, when we are attempting to describe a spiritual state of mind.

The analogy of being

The concept of analogy is one that Tillich drew from St. Thomas Aquinas, and is important enough that we will have to devote part of a chapter later on to the Thomistic concept of the analogy of being.

The important thing to note here is that Tillich insists that talk about a personal God is symbolic language (a metaphor) and not a literal description of a being which thinks and acts exactly like a human being, except that he is much bigger and stronger. When we start thinking that way, Tillich says, we have confused the signpost with that to which it was pointing. And he is also correct in saying that in most periods of Christian history, the top ranking theologians have regarded the idea of a personal God as an image which is totally or almost totally metaphorical, not literal.

The supra-personal vs. the sub-personal

Einstein insisted that a humanistic religion had to talk about the “supra-personal,” and cannot get bogged down in myths and fantasies about personal gods drawn from primitive religion. And Tillich agrees with him, and says that this may be the best way of putting the most important issue here. Only we must look much harder than Einstein did, at how one must go about this.

We must remember that the supra-personal is not the same thing as the sub-personal. “The depth of being cannot be symbolized by objects taken from a realm which is lower than the personal, from the realm of things or sub-personal living beings. The supra-personal is not an ‘It.’” If we try to avoid using any personal symbolism at all in talking about the ground of being, we will of necessity turn this ground into an It. When the only tool we possess for talking about the ground of being and meaning is construed as only a bare “It,” this always ends up turning our understanding of human existence into a sub-personal one:

The “It” element transforms the alleged supra-personal into a sub-personal And such a neutral sub-personal cannot grasp the center of our personality; it can satisfy our aesthetic feeling or our intellectual needs, but it cannot convert our will, it cannot overcome our loneliness, anxiety, and despair. For as the philosopher Schelling says: “Only a person can heal a person.”

This is the reason that the symbol of the Personal God is indispensable for living religion. It is a symbol, not an object, and it never should be interpreted as an object. And it is one symbol besides others indicating that our personal center is grasped by the manifestation of the unaccessible ground and abyss of being.

Let us try putting Tillich’s argument in another form. Human beings who are being forced to walk through the Dark Night of the Soul, are not being thrown into overpowering feelings of rage, self-

pity, anxiety, and despair, because they do not understand a particular mathematical law of physics, or because they misunderstand the precise biological functioning of the gall bladder. They cannot be pulled back into the light by teaching them about physics or biology, or by giving them a mechanical view of the universe.

Instead they have to discover (or be taught) a new source of personal meaning, one to which they can be persuaded to give their total loyalty and commitment. They need to learn about love and compassion for other human beings. They will have to allow themselves to feel all their sorrow for everything in the past which has now been destroyed, and weep tears if necessary, before they will ever discover true acceptance. They will need to come to terms with their own deep inner feelings of guilt, shame, and failure over the things which they did or did not do when their personal worlds were crumbling into ruins, both real guilt and also imaginary guilt (which can be even harder to overcome). They must learn how to find a core of true peace and calm inside, and then discover where to find it outside their minds as well. All of these things have to do with personal values and require us to drive down far below the surface intellectual level into the deeper levels of feeling and imagery which we call the realm of the heart. When we are caught in the Dark Night of the Soul, we are “heart-sick,” to use a traditional English-language metaphor, and (continuing that metaphor), we must recognize that mechanical, sub-personal, intellectual theories will not heal “a broken heart.” Nor will theories of that sort turn those who are cowering in fear, into people of courage, nor give them the impetus to jump once more into the fray, and take on the struggles that will be required to climb out of the dark pit in which we see only night all around us.

Can we remake our lives at the personal level without using personal language to talk about our relationship to the ground of all being and meaning? In practice, it does not work very well, if at all. It can at best achieve only a partial healing of the inner wounds which are crippling the soul. We cannot truly relate what are deeply

personal problems to a purported source of help which is viewed as sub-personal.

And on the other side, because the ground of being is a source of personal healing for the injured soul, we must regard it as supra-personal because it is not only the ground of being from which physical objects and the mechanical forces of nature emerged, but the ground of meaning from which personal healing can emerge. The ground is not in itself a natural object, but is supra-natural in its role as the cause of the world of nature. In similar manner the ground is not itself a person but is supra-personal in its role as the cause of personal change.

Other than that, however, Tillich cautions us that symbolic language using the metaphor of a personal God is only one among many different kinds of religious symbols, and that we should not literalize it or (in Tillich's understanding of things) we will necessarily end up turning God into an object which we will then begin trying to "figure out" and manipulate to our own advantage. Or if not that, we will begin complaining about this over-literalized God-figure whom we have imagined and viewing him as a cruel tyrant or our worst enemy, simply because he does not run the universe in the way we would like to see it run.

The common ground between Einstein and Tillich: cosmic religious feeling

The most interesting thing however about the debate between these two great thinkers, was the area of common ground which in fact lay between them. Einstein laid out similar arguments in another place, in an article which he wrote in 1930, where he said that there were three kinds of religion: there was a religion of fear, a moral religion based on belief in a God who gave rewards and punishments, and a third kind of religion, which he called "cosmic religious feeling."² Einstein rejected all fear-based religion, and said that morality was important to human life but had nothing to do with God, and was best dealt with on totally humanistic grounds. The only valid aspect of religion lay in the third kind of religious

impulse. This was a kind of “cosmic consciousness,” although without the kind of personalistic element which appeared in Richard Maurice Bucke’s influential book on that topic.³

Einstein attempted to describe this cosmic religious feeling in his article, which he said had been a part of religion at all periods of history, although it was rarely found in a pure form:

It is very difficult to elucidate this feeling to anyone who is entirely without it, especially as there is no anthropomorphic conception of God corresponding to it. The individual feels the futility of human desires and aims and the sublimity and marvelous order which reveal themselves both in nature and in the world of thought. Individual existence impresses him as a sort of prison and he wants to experience the universe as a single significant whole. The beginnings of cosmic religious feeling already appear at an early stage of development, e.g., in many of the Psalms of David and in some of the Prophets. Buddhism ... contains a much stronger element of this.

The religious geniuses of all ages have been distinguished by this kind of religious feeling, which knows no dogma and no God conceived in man's image; so that there can be no church whose central teachings are based on it. Hence it is precisely among the heretics of every age that we find men who were filled with this highest kind of religious feeling and were in many cases regarded by their contemporaries as atheists, sometimes also as saints. Looked at in this light, men like Democritus, Francis of Assisi, and Spinoza are closely akin to one another.

How can cosmic religious feeling be communicated from one person to another, if it can give rise to no definite notion of a God and no theology? In my view, it is the most important function of art and science to awaken this feeling and keep it alive in those who are receptive to it.

The infinite and holy

Tillich preferred to use a slightly different terminology for referring to what Einstein called “cosmic religious feeling,” but he

was talking about the same kind of experience. In his *Systematic Theology*, for example, he stressed the importance of the awareness of the infinite. It arose, he said, from our human recognition of our own finitude, which simultaneously disclosed, over against us and limiting us, that which was not finite.⁴ This was an integral and necessary part of the existentialist base which lay under much of his philosophical system.

In a little autobiographical essay which Tillich wrote at one point,⁵ he also explained how important the idea of the holy was in his theology. He talks about how he lived in Schönfliess when he was a small child, a town of three thousand, which was still surrounded by its medieval wall and towered gates, and governed from the old medieval Rathaus or town hall. He remembered how they lived in the parish house,

... with a confessional Lutheran school on the one side and on the other a beautiful Gothic church in which Father was a successful pastor. It is the experience of the “holy” which was given to me at that time as an indestructible good and as the foundation of all my religious and theological work.

He knew at first hand what it was like to live with the sacred presence of the numinous surrounding him on all sides, which enabled him to understand the enormous importance of Otto’s famous book the moment he began reading in it.

When I first read Rudolf Otto’s *Idea of the Holy* I understood it immediately in the light of these early experiences and took it into my thinking as a constitutive element. It determined my method in the philosophy of religion, wherein I started with the experiences of the holy and advanced to the idea of God and not the reverse way. Equally important existentially as well as theologically were the mystical, sacramental, and aesthetic implications of the idea of the holy, whereby the ethical and logical elements of religion were derived from the experience of the presence of the divine and not conversely.

Tillich was around thirty and serving as a military chaplain in the German army at the time Otto's book was published. He apparently used what Otto taught him as the basic tool for getting himself spiritually back on his feet. His war experiences left him in grave doubt about whether there was a God, and whether attempts to act morally meant anything at all, and even whether the universe was a rational place.

But Otto's book told him where to start. He had to go back to the primordial awareness of the numinous, and then build some new idea of God on that base. He had to go to the same source, the fundamental feeling of the holy, and build some new kind of moral and ethical code for himself. How must he act in his life, so as not to betray the vision of the holy, the beautiful, and the good? And in a strange sort of way, even rebuilding his sense that the universe was rational required him to go first to the pre-rational experience of the holy, so that the foundations of his intellectual beliefs could be built on something which he knew with certainty was really there and could not be yanked away. No matter what kind of horrors we are in the midst of, and no matter how much of our lives and our futures have been destroyed, the holy is still there, and gives us something which is oddly totally comforting at the deepest level, as long as we cling to it closely enough.

The sacredness of nature and “nature mysticism”

In his little autobiography, Tillich explains how he always rebelled against the theology of Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889), which had dominated much of Protestant liberal thought during the nineteenth century. Ritschl had sketched a view of a two-layer universe, with an infinite and uncrossable gap separating them: Nature vs. Morality, the realm of scientific investigation vs. the realm of value judgments (*Werturtheile*). When he came to America, he found that many American Protestants were deeply dyed with a kind of Puritan and Calvinist perspective which was very similar:

Nature is something to be controlled morally and technically, and only subjective feelings of a more or less sentimental character toward nature are admitted. There is no mystical participation in nature, no understanding that nature is the finite expression of the infinite ground of all things, no vision of the divine-demonic conflict in nature.

Tillich never found this viewpoint compatible to his own nature, he says. First, he had always, from the time he was a child, enjoyed communing with nature. We have an interesting report about him from a Duke University website:

The theologian Paul Tillich first visited Duke when the Sarah P. Duke Gardens were taking on their present shape in the late 1930s. He was taken to see them as was common for any visitor of the time. But he strongly identified with the Gardens in being himself uprooted and planted in a new land and culture. Every time he returned to Duke through the years he asked to have time to revisit the gardens, visits reported by Tommy Langford, former Dean of the Divinity School and University Provost, that seemed to be an almost mystical experience. Tillich seemed to be lost in thought remembering his past and identifying with the growth and maturing of the landscape as it changed through the years. One almost felt like an intruder accompanying him on his visits, says Langford.

Tillich's final resting place, as we noted in the previous chapter, is in the middle of a tiny but beautiful garden enclosed by evergreen trees in New Harmony, Indiana, at a site which he had visited and approved before his death.

A second factor in his own attitude toward nature, Tillich says, arose from his love of poetry. He cites German literature, but a similar series could be assembled of American, English, and Canadian authors from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, including not only poets like Tennyson ("Speak to Him thou, for He heareth, / And spirit with spirit doth meet, / For

nearer is He than breathing, / And closer than hands and feet"), but also the New England Transcendentalists like Thoreau and Emerson, as well as Richard Maurice Bucke's book *Cosmic Consciousness* (which we mentioned several pages back). But in Tillich's case, it was the traditional German poets who taught him how to look at nature this way:

German poetic literature, even aside from the romantic school, is full of expressions of nature mysticism. There are verses of Goethe, Holderlin, Novalis, Eichendorff, Nietzsche, George, and Rilke which never have ceased to move me as deeply as they did when I first heard them.

But there was also an important theological reason for his position, Tillich says. By the end of the Protestant Reformation, Continental European Protestants had divided into two major groups, the *Lutherans* (who followed Martin Luther up in northern Germany and Scandinavia) and the *Reformed* (to the south and west, in the Netherlands, Switzerland, and parts of southern and middle Germany) who followed the different kind of approach seen in the theologians Zwingli and Calvin. And Tillich was brought up as a Lutheran:

A third cause of this attitude toward nature came out of my Lutheran background. Theologians know that one of the points of disagreement between the two wings of the Continental Reformation, the Lutheran and the Reformed, was the so-called "Extra Calvinisticum," the doctrine that the finite is not capable of the infinite (*non capax infiniti*) and that consequently in Christ the two natures, the divine and the human, remained outside each other. Against this doctrine the Lutherans asserted the "Infra Lutheranum" — namely, the view that the finite is capable of the infinite and consequently that in Christ there is a mutual in-dwelling of the two natures. This difference means that on Lutheran ground the vision of the presence of the infinite in everything finite is theologically affirmed, that nature mysticism is possible and real, whereas on Calvinistic ground such an attitude is suspect

of pantheism and the divine transcendence is understood in a way which for a Lutheran is suspect of deism.

The sacramental view of the universe

To put this in another way, the Lutheran position (and Tillich's position) was closely similar to what Roman Catholics call "the sacramental view of the universe." God communicates himself to us via the material world. The divine grace is given to us in the sacraments of the church only in and through material substances like bread, wine, and water. The same is true of all of nature, where we can apprehend a sunset, a small Spring flower, or a quietly flowing river as alive with the divine presence.

Tillich in Dallas

When I was a seminary student at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, Tillich came to give a lecture. It has to have been at some time in the early 1960's, not long before his death. He was given an honorarium for speaking, but he made it clear that his salary and the royalties from his books gave him ample to live on, and explained that he gave away all his honorarium money in the form of scholarships to needy seminary students.

I can still remember what I experienced when he began to speak. He had a slight bit of what the Vietnam veterans of later years called the thousand-yard-stare. His experiences among the wounded in the First World War, and what he had heard from the hundreds of Jewish refugees whom he helped resettle in America during the period of the Second World War, had left their permanent mark on his soul. Some of the seminary students who had attended Union where he taught in the later 1940's had been World War II combat veterans, and they had responded to him enthusiastically, because they knew that he knew what they had experienced.

But in addition to this, there was an almost visible glow around the man. It startled me, and I realized for the first time what

medieval artists were trying to depict, however inadequately, when they painted a halo of light surrounding one of the great religious figures. He was not a saint in the conventional sense, not by any means. His many affairs with women over the years were well known among the professional theologians. He made his own code to live by and made his own decisions. He was in that way like a medieval Jewish *Lamed Vaver*,⁶ or one of the great Native American shamans, or one of the early Christian desert saints, or one of the deeply spiritual A.A. good old timers like Ernie G. the second of Toledo or Raymond I. in South Bend. There was an overwhelming power and sense of presence, and an aura of danger too. This was someone who was close to God in a way which allowed him to make up his own rules.

He had allowed the sacred to penetrate his own heart and soul to such a degree, that his entire being had been rendered a vehicle of the numinous presence. He was a God-bearer. And you knew beyond a doubt that it was real.

Can one create a spirituality based on the awareness of the infinite and the holy, based on contact with a ground of being which is not in itself describable as a personal God? Tillich was living proof that this was possible, and that such a spirituality was a tool of enormous spiritual power, which could lead human beings through the Dark Night of the Soul and bring them up to the mountain top where the sunlight of the spirit perpetually shines, and the words of healing and salvation are whispered in our ears.

NOTES

1. Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University, 1959), Chapter 9, “The Idea of a Personal God.”

2. Albert Einstein, “Religion and Science,” *New York Times Magazine*, 9 November 1930, 1-4. Reprinted in Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions*, based on *Mein Weltbild*, ed. by Carl Seelig and other sources, new translations and revisions by Sonja Bargmann (New York, Crown Publishers, 1954), 36-40, and also in Albert Einstein, *The World as I See It* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), 24-28. It may also be read online (Feb 2007) at www.geocities.com/HotSprings/6072/1einstein.html

³. This was the book written by Canadian psychiatrist Richard Maurice Bucke (1837-1902), *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind* (Philadelphia: Innes & Sons, 1901). Its influence was so great that we already see a long discussion of it right after its publication in William James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience*, in 1901-1902, in his chapter on mysticism, pp. 294-6. Alcoholics Anonymous historian Mel Barger, one of the foremost experts on the life of Bill Wilson, has emphasized to me the importance of Bucke’s work for understanding Wilson’s ideas and experiences.

4. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 206.

5. Paul Tillich, *My Search for Absolutes*, ch. 1, “What Am I: An Autobiographical Essay: Early Years.”

6. On the lamed vavers, see the section entitled “Judaism and other religions” in Chapter 12, “The God-Bearers and the Analogy of Being.”