Tillich's Theory of Symbolic Participation and the Problem of "Objective Warrant"

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I.

PERHAPS the most overriding aspect of the erosion of religious certainty in our day is what Thomas Altizer has called the "eclipse of the transcedent realm."[1] The "two realm theory" which in one form or another sustained Christian theology ever since the Middle Ages has become increasingly dubious as a frame of reference for theologizing. The empirical philosophers and secular theologians have made this abundantly evident. It was once assumed that "God talk" was related to a body of knowledge which was "given" in scripture, tradition, doctrine, and dogma, all of which referred to a supernatural realm from which the truth had been delivered "once for all." Moreover, this "truth" could be stated in propositions. When Thomas Aquinas detailed the attributes of God, he was speaking about qualities which adhere in God who could be said to exist, so that theological statements for Thomas were very much like what the empiricists call scientific statements since they claimed to have objective truth.

With the "eclipse of the transcendent realm" and the corresponding loss of certainty regarding religious statements, theologians and philosophers today are re-examining the problem of whether theological language has any cognitive significance. Having been well tutored by empirical philosophy, most of us would probably admit, for example, that when I say "God is love" I am speaking symbollically about the meaning of my life or of the community of faith to which I belong. We might agree further that I don't have to say "God is love" unless I want to, that I may say it if I wish, that is if it makes me feel happier or adds contentment to my days, or even a measure of judgment to my actions. And we might also agree that the language of this statement is not empirical in the sense that I am making a factual assertion such as "snow is falling." Having agreed on this much, we would have to conclude that the statement "God is love" doesn't indicate or express anything except that I like to make such statements.

All of this is a familiar lesson and some would be willing to let the matter rest here having drawn a neat line between scientific or empirical language on the one hand and theological statements on the other. But with increasing persistence theologians and philosophers are raising questions about this "fine distinction" and wondering whether too much has been made of the categorical difference between faith assertions and empirical statements. At least it would appear that the question of whether or not religious language may refer to something more than subjective attitudes has not been finally answered to everyone's mutual satisfaction.[2]

[1] Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), pp. 102ff. Altizer discusses the meaning of the loss of transcendence. Altizer's use of such phrases as "incarnational process," "the transcendent's becoming immanent," "forward-moving process of salvation," has interesting implications for natural theology.

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[2] Cf. Jerry H. Gill, "Talk About Religious Talk: Various Approaches to the Nature of Religious Language," in Martin E. Marty and Dean G. Peerman (eds.), *New Theology No. 4* (New York: Macmillan Co.).

II.

Some time ago, Langdon Gilkey observed that neo-orthodoxy had done an end run around the problem of the "reality of God"—a problem, he conjectured, which would once again engage the attention of serious theologians.[3] One aspect of this problem relates to the cognitive meaning of religious statements. What relationship is there, if any, between theological language and empirical objects? Do religious symbols designate events or states of things which are verifiable in any way? If so, then can the same truth be stated more clearly in order to avoid misunderstandings?

These questions are engaging more theological attention today of a less defensive kind. For the past several decades, most theologians have defended the autonomy of religious langauge as "relevation" and have avoided such questions, insisting that theology could stand on its own ground; philosophy could do the same; science likewise. But in more recent years, many theologians have become interested in what John B. Cobb, Jr., has called the question of "objective warrant."[4]

This may be explained in part at least by general agreement among theologians and philosophers that there is now a much less stringent interpretation attached to the words "fact", "truth", "meaning", and "revelation" than would have been allowed a generation ago. To illustrate, we may imagine an astro-physicist, an artist, and a poet on the same mountain at sunset having been asked to "tell about" the sunset. The scientist might describe the refraction of light waves, the movement of the earth, the "cause" of darkness; the artist would give us a vivid impression of colors, perhaps on canvass; the poet would write "Sonnet on the Setting Sun." Obviously, we have before us three views of the same event. It would be absurd to ask the question "Which one is true?" "Which one is factual?" "Which one is meaningful?" In each case, there is some degree of objective correspondence between description and event. From a group of 100 people witnessing the same sunset a sufficiently high percentage of them would probably understand the correspondence between description and reality in the three cases mentioned. In that sense, each "impression" of sunset could be **verified.**

Now, something like this must be admitted when we talk about the difference between philosophy, science, and theology. They do not provide us with the same vision of the world. Is it correct even to say that science deals with "factual" descriptions of reality while theology expresses only non-cognitive attitudes? Could it be, for example, that "sovereignty of God" refers to the same "objective reality" which the scientist is describing when he explains the processes of "birth" and death" to medical students? Both are talking about the "fact" that we are presented with what Gordon Kaufmann calls the "Ultimate Limit". Which of these symbols or language uses is "true" or even "truer"? Which is more adequate? Which corresponds better with reality? Each language structure is designed for certain purposes, but it is unlikely that the doctor's scientific description of the chemistry of a man's death would be any more meaningful to the widow or give her a truer sense of where she stands than the pastor's statement: "The Lord gives, the Lord takes away: Blessed be the name of the Lord." The vision of truth is manifold.

> It is in this sense that Schubert Ogden suggests modern man has: . . . delimited the true too narrowly by treating the the criterion of truth appropriate to empirical science as though it were the only such criterion there is. Against this narrowness, the very existence of myth is a standing protest. Like our moral or aesthetic language, it is a constant reminder that the scope of truth

[3] Cited from notes taken at Langdon Gilkey's lecture series on "Theology and Science" at Princeton Theological Seminary ,May 23-26, 1966.

[4] John B. Cobb, Jr., *Living Options in Protestant Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), p. 317.

is wide and never to be circumscribed by a single criterion.[5]

But even so, we must attempt to clarify both the "scope of truth" and he criteria which we use to test the truth of meaning of religious statements.

III.

Tillich's theory of symbolic participation attempts to bridge the gap between "reason" and "revelation" by arguing that interpretations of reality share the same "ground". To be sure, Tillich's theology is most vulnerable, perhaps, at this very point, for his work has been scorned with equal vigor by the language purists in both theology and philosophy.

In an article entitled "Professor Tillich's Confusions" Paul Edwards criticized Tillich's "existential ontology" and its various "truth claims" by insisting that Tillich's assertions are "meaningless, unintelligible, devoid of cognitive content," "that they say nothing at all, and lack referential meaning."[6] Edwards' central criticism is that Tillich's "metaphors" are not reducible to empirical statements: hence, they are meaningless. Furthermore, he says that "Tillich's theology is compatible with anything whatsoever" because there is no way whereby the correspondence between his theological statements on the one hand and their referential objects on the other can be empirically correlated.[7] On strictly "empirical" grounds, as Edwards defines them, we must agree. But Tillich and others would argue with Edwards over his definition of empirical, and it is precisely at this point that Tillich's theology is relevant to the problem of the objectivity of religious symbols and statements.

Tillich's symbolic theory is explained in terms of his "ontological epistemology" which makes it rather difficult to analyze from empirical presuppositions. Epistemologically Tillich is both a "realist" and an "existentialist". He argues that every subject participates in an essential structure of reality on the one hand, while he insists that the finite cannot "know" the infinite completely. Both "realist" and "existentialist" elements are evident, for example, when Tillich says:

> Knowing is a form of union. In every act of knowledge the knower and that which is known are united; the gap between subject and object is overcome. The subject 'grasps' the object, adapts it to itself, and, at the same time, adapts iself to the object. But the union of knowledge is a peculiar one; it is a union through separation. Detachment is the condition of cognitive union. In order to know, one must "look" at a thing, and, in order to look at a thing, one must be 'at a distance.' Cognitive distance is the presupposition of cognitive union . . . The unity of distance and union is the ontological problem of knowledge. The unity is never completely destroyed; but there is also estrangement. The particular object is strange as such, but it contains essential structures with which the cognitive subject is essentially united and which it can remember when looking at things.[8]

Tillich resembles Aquinas here in that man's partial knowledge (of God) through the structures of reason drives him to the quest for revelation. But Aquinas' system presupposed "nature" and "supernature". Tillich would deny that there are **two sources** of knowledge, one natural in terms of which **we have** certain knowledge of God's esixtence, and one supernatural in terms of which **we are given** knowledge of God's essential nature or attributes. Further, Tillich argues against a fundamental disjunction between various kinds of reason by insisting that all forms of knowledge, whether technical, pragmatic, or symbolic, rest upon an "essential structure of reality" to which they all refer. Hence, there are different **functions** of reason rather than different **kinds.** The human

[5] Schubert M. Ogden, *The Reality of God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 119.
[6] Paul Edwards, "Professor Tillich's Confusions," *Mind,* April, 1965, p. 195.
[7] *Ibid.,* pp. 195 ff.
[8] Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology,* Vol. I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), pp. 94f.

mind puzzles over the sequence of logical or mathematic symbols; it considers alternative proposals for controlling the flow of homeward-bound traffic; it tests the "meaning" of enemy propaganda; it ponders the significance of "human life". But throughout these operations of the mind, there is no basic epistemic cleavage: all knowledge functions reflect a coherence between subject and object. Obviously, this does not imply that all statements even of the same kind are equally valid, truthful, or meaningful. One system of logic won't work; one traffic control pattern is pragmatically better than another. But what about theological statements?

The question remains in what sense theological statements have cognitive meaning or whether they simply reflect non-cognitive states of mind or emotive convictions?

IV

Some time ago Ian Ramsey suggested that "theological assertions must have a logical context which extends to, and is continuous with, those assertions of ordinary language for which sense experience is directly relevant. From such straight-forward assertions," he said, "theological assertions must not be logically segregated, for that would mean that they were pointless and, in contrast to the only language which has an agreed meaning, meaningless."[9] Ramsey is an empiricist and it is not to be expected that Tillich's theology can completely satisfy his notion of "straight-forwardness" but Ramsey goes on to argue for a broader notion of empiricism and in this there may be some similarity between what Ramsey calls for and what Tillich's symbolic theory presents.

First, Ramsey discusses "disclosure situations" in which, presumably, one discovers his identity in relation to aspects of the world which he encounters in one way or another. Self-awareness is subjective, but it arises out of experiences and situations which are objective in nature.[10] Now if the theologian is also discussing, in some sense, the awareness of self vis-a-vis world, then there is an "empirical" base for talking about the "truth" or "meaning" of theological statements. Ramsey says:

> . . . if the empirical possibility of disclosures be allowed, [then we have] an approach both sympathetic to, and benefiting from contemporary empirical insights, while being of real value to theology. It is an approach which forces on theology no systematic metaphysics. Rather it goes to theology interested in the whole range of theological discourse, and its only aim is to map the logical relations exhibited by this discourse, so that we may see more clearly, more reliably, less ambigously, how it performs the task which its initiators gave it when they theologized about their relation.[11]

Now in Tillich's defense against a narrow empiricism we discover, I think, something which is compatible with Ramsey's position. In the first place, Tillich argues that the term "truth" may not be restricted to analytic or empirically verifiable statements which deal only with the "surface level of reality." Hence, "things hide their true being; it must be discovered under the surface of sense impressions, changing appearances, and unfounded opinions . . . The surface must be penetrated the appearance undercut, the 'depth' must be reached, namely, the **ousia**, the 'essence' of things, that which gives them the power of being. This is their truth, the 'really real' in difference from the seemingly real."[12]

Tillich is not depreciating the kind of knowledge which deals with "surface appearances" but he is building his case for a view of the world which cannot be restricted to "experimental" verification. "It is not permissable to make the experimental method of verification the exclusive pattern of all verification."[13] He

[9] Ian T. Ramsey, "Contemporary Empiricism," *The Christian Scholar,* Fall, 1960, p. 181.

[10] Jerry H. Gill, *op. cit.,* p. 117. Gill discusses Ramsey's point of view at some length.

[11] Jerry H. Gill, *op. cit.,* p. 118.

[12] Paul Tillich, ST, I, p. 101.

[13] *Ibid.,* p. 102.

insists that "verification can occur within the life process itself" which is subject to **experiential** verification rather than **experimental** verification. He continues: "The verifying experiences of a non-experimental character are truer to life, though less exact and definite. **By far the largest part of all cognitive verification is experiential.**"[14]

Here Tillich is making a rather careful distinction between what he calls "controlling" and "receiving" knowledge. Controlling knowledge is verified **positivistically,** that is, by the use of technical, scientific reason. Some philosophers, like Edwards, wish to restrict the use of the word "cognition" to this kind of technical or controlling knowledge. But Tillich insists that we also "know" what is **given** and **received** as life-processes which include the whole of our biological, personal, mental, and social existence, although the "tests" for verifying this "receiving knowledge" are not repeatable, precise, or final at any given moment. Thus:

> Life-processes are the object of biological, psychological, and sociological research. A large amount of controlling knowledge and experimental verification is possible and actual in these disciplines; and, in dealing with life-processes, scientists are justified in striving to extend the experimental method as far as possible. But there are limits to these attempts which are imposed not by impotence but by definition. Life-processes have the character of totality, spontaneity, and individuality. Experiments presuppose isolation, regularity, generality. Therefore, **only separable elements of life-processes are open to experimental verification, while the precesses themselves must be received in a creative union in order to be known.** Physicians, psychotherapists, educators, social reformers, and political leaders deal with that side of a life-process which is individual, spontaneous, and total. They can work only on the basis of a knowledge which unites controlling and receiving elements. The truth of their knowledge is verified partly by experimental test, partly by a participation in the individual life with which they deal. If this "knowledge by participation" is called "intuition", the cognitive approach to every individual life-process is intuitive. Intuition in this sense is not irrational, and neither does it by-pass a full consciousness of experimentally verified knowledge.[15]

So far, then, Tillich has widened the meaning of cognition and verification to include aspects of "knowing" which lend themselves to less precisely definable experiential verification. This he does by arguing in a vein similar to Ogden's that "the scope of truth is wide and is never to be circumscribed by a single criterion." Tillich is insisting on a cognitional theory which rests on an emperical base without restricting the meaning of empirical to that which can be scientifically verified. In this sense, at least, Tillich's theology meets Ramsey's suggestion that theologians need to "make plain the empirical anchorage of theological assertions."[16]

V.

If Tillich's epistemology is compatible, not "with anything whatsoever," but with the kind of empiricism we have been discussing, then we must ask how his theory of symbolic participation relates to his "ontological" empiricism. For Tillich, all theological language is symbolic, in the sense that it is non-descriptive (but **not** non-empirical!). At the same time, however, symbolic statements are cognitive **to the** extent that they represent "receiving knowledge" situations, or what Ramsey calls "disclosure situations." Tillich is concerned, then, with the problem of the relation between religious symbols and reality as such. As we have already seen, he does not overlook the question of the empiricists, but he qualifies the meaning of empiricism, and this qualification has direct bearing on his symbolic theory.

A symbol, says Tillich, makes a vital connection between the self and the world because the symbol "participates" in the reality of that to which it points, and it "opens up" levels of the "soul" or

[14] *Ibid.,* italics added.

[15] *Ibid.,* p. 103, italics added.

[16] Ian T. Ramsey, *op. cit.,* p. 181.

self to which it speaks or means something.[17] So, for example, the words, "omnipotent", "benevolent", "omniscient", personal", —even the word "God" itself do not designate the attributes of a highest being; they are not literal signs. If the theologian says "God is omnipotent" his statement is not the same kind of statement as "Mt. McKinley rises 29,281 feet above sea level." However, on the basis of our discussion so far, we could say that both statements are empirical, if the symbol "omnipotent" refers to an aspect of relationship between man and what Richard Niebuhr calls "the last shadowy and vague reality, the secret of existence by virtue of which things come into being, are what they are, and pass away."[18] The task of theology is not that of certifying by experiment the nature of the "creative and abysmal ground of being" but of reckoning with it as **That Which** brings forth, sustains, and finally terminates personal and historical life. To say then, that God is omnipotent and even to affirm "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him" is to speak theologically and therefore symbolically about the nature of things in an empirical-experiential context which gives the statement meaning beyond that of attitudinal, subjective response.

To be sure, Tillich is following the classical argument here that "faith opens the way to knowledge." But he is concerned that philosophy and theology communicate at those points where religious language raises epistemic questions. "Since God is the ground of being, he is the ground of the structure of being . . . God must be approached cognitively through the structural elements of being-itself. These elements . . . enable us to use symbols which we are certain point to the ground of reality."[19]

But does this certify the cognitive function of religious symbols? When Tillich argues that "symbols are independent of any empirical criticism"[20] it would appear that he is jumping back into the theological circle in which statments are based on their own "kerygmatic" adequacy. This is true only with reference to the fact that religious faith is not **premised** on scientific assertions. Beyond this it is possible to "verify" the meaning of theological statements on the grounds of a more inclusive definition of empiricism. This means that some theological statements may not, in fact, be theological statements at all, even though they employ theological terms. For example, the statement "Jesus is coming again on the clouds of heaven next Thursday on Nob Hill" is, according to some empiricists, a meaningful statement since it can be verified or falsified empirically in much the same way as the statement "it will snow next Thursday on Nob Hill." But on the grounds of a more inclusive empiricism, this is not a theological statement: it is rather a conditional historical-scientific prediction which tells us nothing about Jesus Christ or about the world—except negatively.

On the other hand, Tillich's statement "Jesus is the Christ" is a symbolic theological assertion with cognitive meaning. While it does not depend upon historical or scientific discoveries about Jesus of Nazareth, it does refer to a specific human life and to the experience of a community which remembers and interprets that life. As a religious symbol, the cognitive value of the statement "Jesus is the Christ" is derived in part from its reference to the historic faith of the church, but it is also derived from a broader and admittedly more ambiguous life-process situation. As Eliade suggests, "symbols are capable of revealing a modality of the real or a condition of the

[17] Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), p. 42. See also Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: (Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 57.

[18] Richard H. Niebuhr, "Faith in Gods and in God", in Roy Eckardt (ed.), *The Theologian at Work* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 53.

[19] Paul Tilich, ST, I, p. 238.

[20] Paul Tillich, TC, p. 65.

World which is not evident on the plane of immediate experience."[21]

If the statement "Jesus is the Christ" has cognitive significance, it must be because it indicates a "real condition" or state of affairs which is experiencable. We may argue, then, without claiming that Tillich would agree, that the symbol "Jesus is the Christ" means, as John Hick has suggested, that "he offered a new vision or mode of apperception of the world . . . he pointed to the life in which the neighbor is valued equally with the self as something **indicated by the actual nature of the universe.**"[22] Hick argues that the parable of the two houses built on sand and on rock **makes the claim** that "the universe is so constituted that to live in the way which Jesus had described is to build one's life upon enduring foundations."[23] Amos N. Wilder has argued, following Tillich, that "true metaphor or symbol is more than a sign; it is a bearer of the reality to which it refers" so that the parables are to the disciples ". . . Jesus' interpretation to them of his own vision by the powers of metaphor."[24] In a similar vein, Norman Perrin suggests that "the parables import to their hearers something of Jesus' vision of the power of God at work in the experience of men confronted by the reality of his proclamation."[25] In other words, Jesus was making assertions about "the nature of things" which had direct bearing on human life and history. He "disclosed" or "revealed" these structures and purposes to men, and continues to do so, and for that reason is called "Christ".

Therefore, the symbolic statement "Jesus is the Christ" is true both with reference to the historic language of the Christian community, and also with reference to an empirically objective "condition of the World" which is not narrowly experimental on the one hand, nor dependent upon "out of reach sources of knowledge" on the other.

IV.

More than one critic of Tillich's symbolic theory has pointed out that he has failed to explicate clearly what he means by his statement that symbols "participate" in that reality to which they point. John Hick, for example, says that Tillich's theory is "valuably suggestive" but that it scarcely constitutes "a fully articulated philosophical position."[26] From another perspective, Charles Hartshorne insists that Tillich moves toward a Whiteheadian theism of limited relatedness and that Tillich was closer to admitting it than we might have suspected.[27] Tillich himself described his position as "standing on the boundary between reason and revelation."

Part of our difficulty with Tillich's theory is that he attempts to incorporate existential doubt and a form of empirical rationalism in one epistemological system. This requires that religious symbols be "revelatory" in that they are produced in part from a situation of anxiety and doubtfulness about the meaning of life, but have cognitive significance because of their participation in an ontological structure which is knowable.

If the cognitive aspect of Tillich's theory does not "solve" the problem, other alternatives are even more distressing. In general, neo-orthodox theologians have argued that theology has its "objective criteria" in Scripture and Creed. For many, Reinhold Niebuhr's now classic statement that we should take myth seriously but not literally provides the only legitimate approach to the problem we have been discussing. John Herman

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[21] Mircea Eliade, *Mephistopheles and the Androgyne: Studies in Religious Myth and Symbol* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965), p. 201.

[22] John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 93, italics added.

[23] *Ibid.*

[24] Cited in Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 92.

[25] Norman Perrin, *op cit.*, p. 82.

[26] John Hick, *op cit.*, p. 84.

[27] Charles Hartshorne, "Tillich and the Nontheological Meanings of Theological Terms," in T. A. Kantonen (ed.), *Paul Tillich: Retrospect and Future* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1966), p. 30.

Randall, Jr., insists that religious symbols simply evoke and tend to clarify the "vision of God" which subsists in "the eternal realm of the imagination."[28] R. B. Braithwaite argues that religious assertions serve primarily an ethical fuction, that they lend weight to our intentional activity, providing our "practical behavior" with psychological reinforcement.[29]

These alternatives manage to preserve and constitute authentic uses for religious discourse, but they back away from the cognitive problem by delimiting an autonomous function for theological language. Although Tillich's theory raises further questions, his notion of symbolic participation comes to grips directly with the question of the referential significance of religious language. As Ramsey observed, "contemporary empiricism, broadened to include 'disclosures', introduces a more generous amount of rationality, endeavours to map mystery, and displays a deliberate concern for the empirical basis of the Christian faith as expressed in its language of Bible, doctrine, and liturgy knit with appropriate activity."[30]

Following Tillich's lead, then, perhaps we may pursue the task of educidating the "objective warrant" of religious language and symbolism without appealing to a narrow philosophical or dogmatic positivism on the one hand, or resolving everything in mystery and paradox on the other. Theology of this genre admits to "the manifold vision of truth" in which religious discourse may be cognitively productive and significant.

[28] John Hick, *op. cit.*, pp. 86ff. Hick refers to John Herman Randall, Jr.'s *The Role of Knowledge in Western Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958.)

[29] *Ibid.*, pp. 90 ff. Hick bases his discussion here on R. B. Braithwaite's An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955).

[30] Ian T. Ramsey, *op. cit.*, p. 184.