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Excerpt

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## **Part I**

*Standing within the theological circle*

## I Tillich's life and works

WERNER SCHÜBLER

Paul Tillich was born on 20 August 1886 in Starzeddel, Germany (today Starosiedle in Poland), where his father, Johannes Tillich, was a Lutheran minister.<sup>1</sup> In 1890 the family moved to Schönfließ/Neumark (today Trzcinsko Zdrój in Poland), where Johannes Tillich was appointed to the post of chief pastor (*Oberpfarrer*) and district superintendent. From 1900 onwards the family lived in Berlin. The early death of Paul's mother Mathilde (*née* Dürselen) in 1903 must have affected him deeply.

### TILlich'S INTELLECTUAL FORMATION: IDEALISM AND APOLOGETICS

Tillich's fascination with philosophy extends as far back as his final years at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Gymnasium, and by the time he had completed his *Abitur* and matriculated in the Theology Faculty of the University of Berlin in the winter semester of 1904 he had already acquired a good knowledge of the history of philosophy, in particular Kant and Fichte. In the summer semester of 1905 he continued his studies in Tübingen. For the following four semesters he chose to go to the University of Halle, which at that time had a high reputation in theological circles. The most important theologian at Halle was Martin Kähler, who would exert a long-lasting influence on Tillich.

While studying, Tillich joined the *Wingolf* Christian student fraternity and quickly came to the notice of his fellow members in virtue of his polished debating talents, as a result of which he was elected fraternity representative for the summer semester of 1907. After the end of the semester Tillich continued his studies in Berlin, and in autumn 1908 he passed his first examination in theology with the highest grade of 'Recht gut' ('Very good').

Unusually, Tillich's first appointment was not as a curate, but between March and October 1909 the 23-year-old Tillich replaced minister Ernst Klein as a substitute minister (*Pfarrverweser*) in Lichtenrade,

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assuming full responsibility for a parish. Several of his sermons survive from this period, which already attest to the early development of the systematic power of Tillich's thinking.<sup>2</sup>

In the meantime Tillich had begun an intensive study of Schelling, which resulted in a philosophical dissertation on Schelling entitled 'Die religionsgeschichtliche Konstruktion in Schellings positiver Philosophie, ihre Voraussetzungen und Prinzipien' submitted to the University of Breslau.<sup>3</sup> After a successful viva voce Tillich received his PhD in Philosophy on 22 August 1910, subsequently taking up his curacy in Nauen on 1 April 1911. On 22 April 1912 Tillich obtained his licenciate at the Theology Faculty in Halle with his thesis 'Mystik und Schuldbewußtsein in Schellings philosophischer Entwicklung'.<sup>4</sup>

At an autumn *Wingolf* conference in Kassel in 1911 Tillich met with some old friends to discuss the question of the repercussions of historical research on Christology. He was later to consider this conference a crucial moment in his theological development:

I asked how Christian doctrine might be understood if the non-existence of the historical Jesus were to become historically probable, and then attempted to answer my own question. Even now I insist on raising this question radically rather than falling back on the kind of compromises that I encountered then and that Emil Brunner is now offering. The foundation of Christian belief is the biblical picture of Christ, not the historical Jesus. The criterion of human thought and action is the picture of Christ as it is rooted in ecclesiastical belief and human experience, not the shifting and artificial construct of historical research.

(*BOB*, 320)

After his ordination on 18 August 1912 in the St Matthäus-Kirche in Berlin Tillich worked as an assistant minister at the Erlöserkirche in Berlin-Moabit, where for the first time in his life he came into contact with members of the working classes and became acquainted at close hand with their personal and economic misery. This was his first encounter with the proletariat, and it laid the ground for his subsequent path to religious socialism.

In the summer of 1912 Tillich and his friend Richard Wegener pondered over how the church could be made to appeal once again to the educated classes, who had become distant from its life. The two friends decided to organize talks, to which students, artists and academics were invited. These talks soon came to be known as the 'Vernunft-Abende'

and demonstrate the particular apologetic impulse that was to become such an enduring characteristic of Tillich's later thought.

#### THE FIRST TURNING-POINT: THE IMPACT OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

After completing his work as an assistant minister Tillich chose to pursue an academic career, beginning post-doctoral work at Halle in 1913 on a theological *Habilitationsschrift*. However, not for the last time, personal and world-historical factors imposed themselves on Tillich's academic development. On 28 September 1914, Tillich married Greti Wever, with whom he had become acquainted in the summer of 1913. Although friends openly warned him against the marriage, Tillich's mind was made up. Greti herself, in whose life religion played no great part, also entertained doubts. Then, at the beginning of October 1914, only a matter of days after his marriage, Tillich voluntarily enrolled as an army chaplain in the First World War. At first, a certain mood of optimism is discernible in his letters; however, this optimism quickly evaporated. In Bieuxy (France), Tillich was involved as chaplain in the first German military operations. On the 30 and 31 October 1915, he experienced horrific hostilities near Sommepey-Tahure, but worse still lay before him, namely the horrors of Verdun in 1916.

After recuperating following the battle of Verdun, Tillich was granted leave to complete his *Habilitation* in Halle. The post-doctoral work that he had meanwhile completed was entitled 'Der Begriff des Übernatürlichen, sein dialektischer Charakter und das Prinzip der Identität dargestellt an der supranaturalistischen Theologie vor Schleiermacher' ('The Concept of the Supernatural, its Dialectical Character and the Principle of Identity in Supranatural Theology before Schleiermacher').<sup>5</sup> Doubts were initially raised in the Faculty at Halle about Tillich's work, which, as Professor Wilhelm Lütgert was to inform him in a letter dated 8 July 1915, was considered too philosophical and not answering to the title; it was in addition felt to be not sufficiently historical, but rather 'purely logical, purely dialectical' ('rein logisch, rein dialektisch'), presupposing as self-evidently true the principles of 'Identity Philosophy' (*Identitätsphilosophie*). Nevertheless, in view of the difficult geo-political situation, the Faculty were reluctant to obstruct Tillich's chances of an academic career; thus, Tillich was not required to make revisions but only to alter his title, making clear that the work was 'rein formal logisch-dialektisch' (*ENGW* V, 101f.).<sup>6</sup>

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On 3 July 1916 Tillich delivered a private *Probevorlesung* ('trial lecture') with an accompanying colloquium, and on 20 July 1916 he delivered his inaugural lecture.

In the remaining years of the war (1917–18) Tillich did not return to the hostilities. Nevertheless – or perhaps precisely for that reason – at the end of March 1918 Tillich suffered from an acute nervous disorder, which led to a short stay in hospital. On 30 July 1918 he was stationed back in his home country and on 15 December 1918 was discharged from the army. The sermons composed while he was an army chaplain have recently been published and provide interesting glimpses into Tillich's experience of the war.<sup>7</sup>

During the war Tillich's marriage had suffered. Greti had become involved with Tillich's friend Richard Wegener, and when Greti was finally expecting a second child with Wegener – their first child, born in 1919, lived to be only a few days old – Tillich agreed to a divorce, which was pronounced on 22 November 1921. Returning to Berlin, Tillich became increasingly committed to socialism, considering the recent catastrophe of the war a consequence of a particular ordering of society and of certain ideas bound up with such a social order. Beginning in 1919 Tillich started to meet regularly with Eduard Heimann, Carl Menicke, Alexander Rüstow, Arnold Wolfers and Adolf Löwe, who formed the so-called 'Kairos Circle' ('Kairos-Kreis'). The *Blätter für Religiösen Sozialismus*, which was published between 1920 and 1927 and to which Tillich contributed various articles, was the public organ of this circle. In the *Blätter* Tillich appealed to the church and its representatives to adopt a positive stance towards socialism and social democracy, and he advocated the possibility of a union between Christianity and socialism. The *Neue Blätter für den Sozialismus*, which was published from 1930 onwards, was also decisively shaped by Tillich.

#### TILlich'S THEOLOGICAL VOCATION

In 1919 Tillich began lecturing at the Theology Faculty in Berlin as an untenured lecturer (*Privatdozent*). His first lecture in the summer semester of 1919 was entitled 'Das Christentum und die Gesellschaftsprobleme der Gegenwart' ('Christianity and the Present Problems of Society'), and later lectures (among other things) focused on philosophy of religion (1920 and 1922–3), the religious content and the religio-historical significance of Greek philosophy (1920–1), Western philosophy since the Renaissance (1921), and the intellectual history (*Geistesgeschichte*) of early Christian and medieval philosophy

(1923–4).<sup>8</sup> A work of particular importance from this period is his programmatic lecture entitled 'Über die Idee einer Theologie der Kultur' which he delivered on 16 April 1919 at the Kant-Gesellschaft; this work is a manifesto for Tillich's distinctive revisioning of theology as theology of culture.<sup>9</sup>

In 1920 Tillich met Hannah Werner at a fancy-dress party. Hannah was at this time in a relationship with art teacher Albert Gottschow, whom she was to marry shortly afterwards. One year later, however, she would leave her husband for Tillich; they married on 22 March 1924 in Friedersdorf. Much has been written in recent years about Tillich's marriage, although what is true and false in these accounts is impossible for a third party to judge. One thing, however, should not be ignored: despite all the tensions in their marriage Tillich nevertheless always maintained that 'Hannah always stood by me.' Margot Hahl, who has compared the bond between Tillich and Hannah to that between Schelling and Caroline, has stressed that this marriage should not be judged 'according to conventional standards'.<sup>10</sup>

In the early years of the 1920s Tillich worked hard to make himself eligible for an academic chair. In 1923 his first major publication, *Das System der Wissenschaften nach Gegenständen und Methoden*, appeared, which Emanuel Hirsch praised as one of the most mature achievements of recent German systematic philosophy.<sup>11</sup> In this work Tillich sought to secure a place for theology within the circle of the sciences. It would not be long until Tillich was offered a chair: in 1924, after five years as a *Privatdozent*, Tillich was made an Associate Professor for Systematic Theology at the Philipps-Universität in Marburg.

In his 'Autobiographical Reflections' Tillich wrote the following about his time in Marburg:

During the three semesters of my teaching there I met the first radical effects of the neo-orthodoxy on theological students: cultural problems were excluded from theological thought; theologians like Schleiermacher, Harnack, Troeltsch, Otto, were contemptuously rejected; social and political ideas were banned from theological discussions. The contrast with the experiences in Berlin was overwhelming, at first depressing and then inciting: a new way had to be found.<sup>12</sup>

Tillich sought this new way in his lectures on 'Dogmatics' delivered between the years 1925 and 1927, which marked a decisive step on the way to his later *Systematic Theology*.<sup>13</sup> In these lectures he formulated a principle applicable to his entire theology: 'Theology must go on

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the offensive' ('Theologie muß Angriff sein'). This 'Dogmatik', which was prepared for publication in 1930 under the title 'Die Gestalt der religiösen Erkenntnis' ('The Structure of Religious Knowledge'), is not, however, Tillich's first attempt at a systematic work. This can be traced back to the year 1913, and the idea of capturing the world through a system of thought had clearly excited Tillich as far back as his student days in Tübingen, as he was to relate in a lecture from the year 1963.<sup>14</sup>

It was also during Tillich's time in Marburg that he encountered Martin Heidegger. As Tillich later remarked: 'It was only years later that I became fully aware of the influence of this encounter on my own thinking. I fought against it and sought only to affirm its new methods of thinking without accepting its results' (GW XII, 69). An alternative perspective comes from Hans-Georg Gadamer, at that time a *Privatdozent* in Marburg, who commented retrospectively on Tillich:

I would like to think that Tillich was not very lucky in Marburg. At that time the Theology Faculty was very much determined by Bultmann, von Soden and indirectly by Heidegger, and the faculty was very critical of Tillich's dialectical skill . . . Those of us who were students of Heidegger found Tillich's work only superficially grounded in real research, and I must say that in certain respects Tillich showed us to be correct. Nonetheless, we were friendly, and he was so charming that it is impossible to speak ill of him. His warmth and tremendous good nature prevented these small academic differences from clouding the atmosphere.

(ENGW V, 166)

An important contribution from Tillich's time in Marburg is his lecture 'Rechtfertigung und Zweifel' ('Justification and Doubt') which he delivered in 1924 in Gießen.<sup>15</sup> In this lecture Tillich applied the doctrine of justification to the intellectual life: according to his interpretation, not only is the sinner justified before God, but also the doubter. At this time Tillich's influence began to be felt outside the academy: for example, the 'Berneuchen movement', a reform movement within the Lutheran church, adopted Tillich's concept of symbolic thinking, which corresponded to their firm opposition to all forms of supernaturalistic thinking.

In the summer semester of 1925 Tillich was invited to take up the position of Professor of Religious Studies at the Dresden University of Technology. At this time Dresden was intellectually and culturally an important city. It is unsurprising, therefore, that it was here that Tillich wrote his celebrated work on *Die religiöse Lage der Gegenwart* (1926),

which brought his thought to a wider public.<sup>16</sup> In his lectures given during these years Tillich built upon the theological work that he had begun in Marburg. He lectured from his dogmatics, but now under a different title. Not only the title had changed: he now employed new concepts, for example 'lack of being' (*Seinsverfehlung*) instead of 'sin' (*Sünde*), in this way attempting to reach those 'spiritual seekers' who had turned away from the church. However, his language, on the whole, remained too academic. Thirty years later Tillich was to make the following poignant self-criticism: 'The writings . . . that I had written toward the end of the twenties were not written in what I would now identify as the German language, but in what might be called 'philosopher-German' (*Philosophendeutsch*).'<sup>17</sup>

On 24 December 1925 Tillich was awarded an honorary doctorate from the Theology Faculty at Halle. The Dean and former teacher of Tillich, Professor Wilhelm Lütgert, testified in the diploma to the 'conceptual sharpness and dialectical skill' with which Tillich 'developed a programme of the philosophy of religion and a general theory of science, as well interesting and inspiring the younger generation of scholars in their attempt to bring philosophy and the social sciences into contact with living religion' (*GW XIII*, 582).

During the winter semester 1927–8 Tillich received an invitation to take up the position of Honorary University Professor for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophy of Culture at the Theological Faculty of the University of Leipzig. His inaugural lecture, which he delivered in June 1927, was entitled 'Die Idee der Offenbarung' ('The Idea of Revelation'). His lectures in Leipzig – although presented under another title – were the same as those he had given in Dresden.

However, Tillich soon came to feel that Dresden could only be a transitional place for him, and consequently he made every effort from spring 1928 onwards to obtain a chair at the Theology Faculty of the University of Berlin. However, doubts were raised about his theology, which Tillich worked hard to dispel. For example, in a letter to Professor Erich Seeberg dated 1 November 1928 he concedes:

As far as the 'churchness' (*Kirchlichkeit*) of my theology is concerned, I understand your doubts. However, they have their essential ground in that I have developed my personal life away from the church, while I have developed my professional life towards it. This second development is, on account of our present situation, very slow and laborious. However, I consider it more fruitful than following an obvious employment in the service of



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the church. It is for this reason that there are still few published pieces that clearly set out my progress towards that goal. The largest work, my *Dogmatics*, languishes in my notebooks and much work remains to be done before it will be published.<sup>18</sup>

Having exhausted his hopes of moving to Berlin, Tillich finally realized that his only opportunity to leave Dresden lay in switching to a philosophy faculty. On 24 April 1929 Tillich was invited against the will of the Faculty to succeed Hans Cornelius as University Professor for Philosophy and Sociology at the University of Frankfurt am Main; Max Scheler, who had received the invitation before Tillich, died before being able to occupy the chair. Cornelius himself was extremely resistant to Tillich's succeeding him; in a manner not untypical of certain philosophical critiques of Tillich's work, Cornelius proclaimed that *The System of the Sciences* was of a very low level academically, containing banalities of all kinds and employing unclear concepts.

Once installed, however, Tillich was to find Frankfurt very fruitful. He enjoyed good working relationships with his colleagues; particularly stimulating was his close contact with Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, later of course leading figures in the Frankfurt School of critical theory. During these years Tillich gave lectures on the philosophy of history, social education and philosophy of religion, on Schelling and the internal crisis of German Idealism, on the development of philosophy from late antiquity to the Renaissance, on the social ethics of Thomas Aquinas and modern Catholic social ethics, on the history of philosophical ethics, on Hegel as well as on the philosophical ideas of German Classicism from Lessing to Novalis. However, his last, great lecture on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French philosophy was overshadowed by the political events of the winter of 1932–3.

#### THE SECOND TURNING-POINT: TOWARDS A NEW WORLD

At first Tillich believed he could retain some degree of influence in National Socialist Germany. However, following a warning by Max Horkheimer he eventually came to realize that he would not be able to remain in Germany. On 13 April 1933 Tillich was suspended from his chair on account of his programmatic paper *Die sozialistische Entscheidung* and his positive stance towards Jewish students as Dean of the Philosophy Faculty.<sup>19</sup> In the midst of this fraught situation Tillich received an unexpected offer from Union Theological Seminary in New York

inviting him to teach there for a year in the first instance as a Visiting Professor and simultaneously to give lectures in philosophy at nearby Columbia University. Tillich accepted the offer and arrived, together with his wife Hannah and their 7-year-old daughter Erdmuthe, in New York at the beginning of November 1933.

On arrival in New York Tillich was chiefly preoccupied with trying to master the English language, a task he would have difficulties with for the remainder of his life. A meteoric rise up the career ladder at Union was out of the question: the lecture timetable at Union for these years shows that from 1933 Tillich was a mere Lecturer on Philosophy of Religion and Systematic Theology and from 1936 a Lecturer on Philosophical Theology. Only in 1937 would he become Associate Professor of Philosophical Theology and finally, in 1940, Professor of Philosophical Theology. During these years Tillich lectured on philosophy of religion and systematic theology. From 1945 onwards he also gave lectures on 'Church History' and 'History of Christianity' instead of philosophy of religion.

Thanks to his extensive lecturing activities Tillich quickly became known outside Union. As early as 1934 he was invited to the celebrated 'Theological Discussion Group', and only a few years later he was offered membership of the 'Philosophy Club', a privilege extended to only the most exceptional individuals. During these years Tillich was to focus increasingly on depth psychology and its inner relationship to religion. Tillich saw depth psychology as a golden opportunity for theology, just as Kant had seen such an opportunity for philosophy in mathematics, a point he was to stress again and again in his courses of lectures. Tillich was to incorporate depth psychology into his theological thinking and thus explain traditional theological concepts in contemporary language.

If at first only fifteen to twenty students attended Tillich's lectures, this quickly changed: alongside the Union seminarians, graduate students from Columbia University, members of the general public and German émigrés also attended the overcrowded lectures. In response to the question 'What did they want to hear?' the psychoanalyst Rollo May, an erstwhile student of Tillich's, provided the following answer:

Tillich sat at the lecture table, trying to pronounce his words in the English he was then just learning. Despite the broken language, I felt I had been waiting all my life for someone to speak out as he did. His words called forth truths in myself that I had known vaguely for years but never dared articulate . . . Tillich spoke with changing expressions of agony and joy reflecting in his face what