

The Student Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Summary Statement on Research

Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers Project

As part of a long-term effort to preserve the historical legacy of the African-American freedom struggle, the Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers Project is preparing a definitive, multivolume edition of King's papers.¹ King Project staff members and students at Stanford University, Emory University, and at the Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change have been assembling and preparing accurate texts of King's most significant correspondence, sermons, public statements, published writings, and unpublished manuscripts. The initial two volumes of *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* will cover the period before the start of the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott in December 1955. These volumes will document King's family background, his childhood in Atlanta, his academic training at Morehouse College in Atlanta (1944–1948), Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania (1948–1951), and Boston University (1951–1955), and his first year as pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery. The volumes are scheduled for publication by the University of California Press in 1992.

In accordance with established procedures for documentary editing, the King Project investigated the historical and intellectual context in which King's Crozer and Boston University academic papers were created. Project staff members then prepared annotations for more than fifty papers, calling attention to texts that may have influenced King's writings. Early in 1988, staff members became aware that many of the papers, including King's dissertation, contain passages that are similar or identical to texts King consulted and that he did not adequately cite those source texts. King's bibliography or notes nearly always identify his sources, but the lack of adequate citations and quotation marks obscures the extent to which King relied upon the works of others.

¹ The Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Inc., in Atlanta, initiated the project in 1984. The following year, the center's chief executive officer, Coretta Scott King, chose Stanford University historian Clayborne Carson as the project's director and senior editor. As a result of his appointment, the project has been conducted in association with Stanford University. In 1988, the King Project also established an office at Emory University under the supervision of associate editor Ralph E. Luker.

King Project researchers found that King drew upon a wide range of sources that reflected his theological preferences and that he selectively appropriated passages from scholarly writings to express his evolving religious views. Appropriated passages are particularly evident in his writings in his major field of graduate study, systematic theology. King did not claim to provide original answers to the central issues in this field but instead presented himself as a synthesizer, describing himself in one Crozer paper as attempting to "synthesize the best in liberal theology with the best in neo-orthodox theology."²

A paper that illustrates King's characteristic selective use of appropriated passages dates from the Crozer period. In an essay written for Professor George Washington Davis, entitled "The Place of Reason and Experience in Finding God," King criticized the theology of Karl Barth, who denied the capacity of human reason and experience to attain knowledge of a "wholly other" God. "This Barthian attempt to undermine the rational in religion is one of the perils of our time," King warned. King's criticism of Barth echoed the views of Davis, who later that year wrote an anti-Barthian article for the *Crozer Quarterly*.³ In challenging Barth's pessimism, King also relied heavily on the work of Edwin Ewart Aubrey, president of Crozer when King arrived, and Edgar S. Brightman, with whom King later studied at Boston. King's footnotes and bibliography make clear his general indebtedness to these theologians, but the paper also includes several uncited passages that closely follow the source texts. The paper's conclusion even adopts Brightman's first-person pronoun. (See excerpts, set A.)

Set A

King	Brightman
We must grant freely, however, that final intellectual certainty about God is impossible. Our knowledge of the absolute will always remain relative. We can never gain complete knowledge or proof of the real.	We have granted freely, however, that final intellectual certainty is impossible. . . . we can never attain complete knowledge or proof of the real. ⁴

Soon after entering Boston University, King submitted a paper that contains an unusually large number of appropriated passages. Entitled "Contemporary Continental Theology" and probably prepared for a course taught by King's adviser, L.

² Martin Luther King, Jr., "How Modern Christians Should Think About Man," [Nov. 29, 1949–Feb. 15, 1950], folder 14, box 112, Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers (Mugar Memorial Library, Boston University, Boston, Mass.).

³ King, "Place of Reason and Experience in Finding God"; George Washington Davis, "Some Theological Continuities in the Crisis Theology," *Crozer Quarterly*, 27 (July 1950), 208–19. King took nearly a third of his classes at Crozer with Davis. Two years later, in an essay written at Boston University, King appropriated a few passages from Davis's article without citing his former teacher. See Martin Luther King, Jr., "Karl Barth's Conception of God," Jan. 2, 1952, folder 20, box 113, King Papers (Mugar Library).

⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Place of Reason and Experience in Finding God," [Sept. 13, 1949–Nov. 23, 1949], folder 17, box 112, King Papers (Mugar Library). King's text is not footnoted. As in the published edition, King's spelling errors have not been corrected. Edgar S. Brightman, *The Finding of God* (New York, 1931), 69, 72.

Harold DeWolf, the paper surveys writings by European theologians, including Anders Nygren, whose book *Agape and Eros* has been seen as a major influence on King.⁵ Many of the sentences and quotations come from *Contemporary Continental Theology* by Walter Marshall Horton. King obscured his reliance on Horton by referring to him only once, when he acknowledged that a passage was "quoted from Horton's, *Contemporary Continental Theology*."⁶ While King cited fourteen quotations to European theologians, those quotations—and the surrounding text—appear in Horton's book. The essay, which DeWolf judged "Superior," contains a passage that illustrates King's characteristic tendency to rely on unacknowledged secondary sources in his explications of the works of major intellectuals. (See set B.)

Set B

King	Horton
<p>As Nygren set out to contrast these two Greek words he finds that Eros loves in proportion to the value of the object. By the pursuit of value in its objects, Platonic love is led up and away from the world, on wings of aspiration, beyond all transient things and persons to the realm of the Ideas. Agape as described in the Gospels and Epistles, is "spontaneous and uncaused," indifferent to human merit," and creates value in those upon whom it is bestowed out of pure generosity. It flows down from God into the transient, sinful world; those whom it touches become conscious of their own utter unworthiness; they are impelled to forgive and love their enemies, because the God of Grace imparts worth to them by the act of loving them.*</p> <p>[King's footnote * is to Nygren, <i>Agape and Eros</i>, 52-56.]</p>	<p>It is Eros, not Agape, that loves in proportion to the value of its object. By the pursuit of value in its object, Platonic love is led <i>up and away</i> from the world, on wings of aspiration, beyond all transient things and persons to the realm of the Ideas. Agape, as described in the Gospels and Epistles, is "spontaneous and 'uncaused,'" "indifferent to human merit," and "creates" value in those upon whom it is bestowed out of pure generosity. It flows <i>down from God</i> into this transient, sinful world; those whom it touches become conscious of their own utter unworthiness; they are impelled to forgive and love their enemies, . . . because the God of grace imparts worth to them by the act of loving them.*</p> <p>[Horton's footnote * is to Nygren, <i>Agape and Eros</i>, 52-56.]⁷</p>

⁵ Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (New York, 1932). See John J. Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Making of a Mind* (Maryknoll, 1982), 9-15.

⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Contemporary Continental Theology," [Sept. 13, 1951-Jan. 15, 1952], folder 14, box 112, King Papers (Mugar Library). Quantitative assessments of textual appropriation vary according to the criteria used to distinguish appropriated text from legitimate paraphrases. Thus, 84 sentences in "Contemporary Continental Theology" (32% of the total number) were identical to the source material. Using a different definition of appropriation, a greater number of sentences (102, or 39%) were taken from source sentences that contained additional words, while even more sentences (135, or 52%) contained no more than four of King's own words.

⁷ King, "Contemporary Continental Theology"; Walter Marshall Horton, *Contemporary Continental Theology: An Interpretation for Anglo-Saxons* (New York, 1938), 164.

Most of King's Boston papers exhibit more careful citation practices than this paper does, but textual appropriation and misleading citation practices are found even in King's advanced writings on systematic theology, including his dissertation. Prepared under DeWolf's supervision, the dissertation, entitled "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman," was King's most thoroughly researched work. Drawing heavily on the writings of Tillich and Wieman, King cited their works on numerous occasions and often allowed them to speak for themselves. The practice of closely paraphrasing difficult theological and philosophical texts is not unusual among scholars, but King's expository sections on Tillich appropriate entire sentences and occasionally longer passages. The pattern is particularly evident in the explication of Tillich's classic *Systematic Theology*. In the second chapter of the dissertation, which is devoted to the methodologies of the theologians, only 49 percent of the sentences in the section on Tillich contain five or more words that were King's own; the other sentences were at least in part quoted or appropriated from source texts without citation. In some instances King indicated the original source with a footnote, as shown in set C of the excerpts.

Set C

<i>King</i>	<i>Tillich</i>
<p>Tillich asserts that theology has neither the duty nor the power to confirm or to negate religious symbols. Its task is to interpret the symbols according to theological principles and methods. But in the process of interpretation at least two things may happen: on the one hand, theology may discover contradictions between symbols within the theological circle; on the other hand, theology may speak not only as theology but also as religion. In the first case, theology can point out the religious and theological errors embedded in certain symbols; in the second case, theology can become prophecy, contributing to a change in the revelatory situation.*</p> <p>[King's footnote * is to Tillich, <i>Systematic Theology</i>, I, 240.]</p>	<p>Theology as such has neither the duty nor the power to confirm or to negate religious symbols. Its task is to interpret them according to theological principles and methods. In the process of interpretation, however, two things may happen: theology may discover contradictions between symbols within the theological circle and theology may speak not only as theology but also as religion. In the first case, theology can point out the religious dangers and the theological errors which follow from the use of certain symbols; in the second case, theology can become prophecy, and in this role it may contribute to a change in the revelatory situation.⁸</p>

⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman" (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1955), 107; Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols., Chicago, 1951-1963), I, 240.

In other instances, while still clearly indicating that his purpose was to present Tillich's ideas rather than his own, King used Tillich's words without explicit attributions. (See set D.)

Set D

King	Tillich
The third ontological polarity which Tillich discusses is that of freedom and destiny. Here the description of the basic ontological structure and its elements reaches both its fulfilment and its turning point. Ordinarily one thinks of necessity as the correlate of freedom. However, necessity is a category and not an element. Its contrast is possibility, not freedom.	The third ontological polarity is that of freedom and destiny, in which the description of the basic ontological structure and its elements reaches both its fulfilment and its turning point. . . . Ordinarily one speaks of freedom and necessity. However, necessity is a category and not an element. Its contrast is possibility, not freedom. ⁹

King's attribution practices did not indicate the full extent of his reliance on other scholars who had written about Tillich. The Tillich literature was considerable when King wrote his thesis, and he occasionally presented an interpreter's argument as his own. In the introduction to the dissertation, King acknowledged the "valuable secondary sources" bearing on his concerns and promised his readers that he would indicate instances when he utilized such sources "by appropriate footnotes." King did indeed refer to the secondary literature in his footnotes, and the dissertation includes a "review of the work of other investigators" that mentions "a very fine dissertation" on Tillich that had been completed at Boston University in 1952 by DeWolf's student, Jack Boozer.¹⁰ King's indebtedness to Boozer, however, was more extensive than these comments suggest. Although he cited Boozer only twice, he appropriated more than fifty complete sentences from Boozer's dissertation and followed the general structure of Boozer's work, using many of the same section titles. The example in set E of the boxed excerpts illustrates King's use of Boozer.

The example shown in set F of the excerpts suggests that one of King's sources, an article by John Herman Randall, Jr., has deficiencies similar to those in King's dissertation.

Why didn't King's professors notice his extensive textual appropriations? Although they contain many appropriated passages, King's student papers apparently met the expectations of his readers. He successfully presented himself as a skillful explicator of the works of major theologians, rather than as a contributor of original ideas.

⁹ King, "Comparison of Conceptions," 77; Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, 182. The next paragraph in the dissertation is an extended quotation from Tillich. *Ibid.*

¹⁰ King, "Comparison of Conceptions," 7, 5. See Jack Boozer, "The Place of Reason in Paul Tillich's Concept of God" (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1952).

Set E

King	Boozer	Tillich
Tillich insists that a symbol is more than a merely technical sign.* The basic characteristic of the symbol is its innate power. A symbol possesses a necessary character. It cannot be exchanged. A sign, on the contrary, is impotent and can be exchanged at will. A religious symbol is not the creation of a subjective desire or work. If the symbol loses its ontological grounding, it declines and becomes a mere "thing," a sign impotent in itself.	Tillich distinguishes between a sign and a symbol.* A characteristic of the symbol is its innate power. A symbol possesses a necessary character. It cannot be exchanged. On the other hand a sign is impotent in itself and can be exchanged at will. . . . The religious symbol is not the creation of a subjective desire or work. If the symbol loses its ontological grounding, it declines and becomes a mere "thing," a sign impotent in itself.	The third characteristic of the symbol is its innate power. This implies that the symbol has a power inherent within it that distinguishes it from the mere sign which is impotent in itself. This characteristic is decisive for the distinction between a sign and a symbol. The sign is interchangeable at will. It does not arise from necessity, for it has no inner power. The symbol, however, does possess a necessary character. It cannot be exchanged. ¹¹

[King's footnote * cites Tillich, "The Religious Symbol," 14 ff.]

[Boozer's footnote * cites Tillich, "The Religious Symbol," 14 ff.]

King's professors made critical comments on his papers, calling attention to grammatical and interpretive errors, but they did not notice stylistic and thematic inconsistencies that would have caused them to suspect multiple authorship. That many of King's papers are routine and derivative explications of theological topics suggests that his professors did not expect more originality in such student compositions. The generally positive evaluations King's papers received probably also reflected faculty members' highly favorable opinions of King's overall performance in classroom discussions and in-class examinations.

King's Crozer and Boston transcripts reveal a record of academic success. At Crozer, King graduated at the top of his class, was the only student in his year granted honors in comprehensive examinations, and acquired a reputation for great leadership potential. Dean Charles E. Batten saw him as

one of the most brilliant students we have had at Crozer. He has a keen mind which is both analytical and constructively creative. While interested in social action, he has a fine theological and philosophical basis on which to promulgate his ideas and activities. He is particularly interested in philosophy and has done fine work in it both at Crozer and at Penn. He is a real leader as evidenced by the confidence his fellow students have in him by electing him president of the student body.¹²

¹¹ King, "Comparison of Conceptions," 22-23; Boozer, "Place of Reason," 125; Paul Tillich, "The Religious Symbol," *Journal of Liberal Religion*, 2 (Summer 1940), 13-14.

¹² Charles E. Batten, "Crozer Theological Seminary Placement Committee: Confidential Evaluation of Martin

Set F

King	Randall	Tillich
Tillich is attempting to say . . . that individuation implies participation. Man participates in the universe through the rational structure of mind and reality. When individualization reaches the perfect form we call a "person," participation reaches the perfect form we call "communion". . . .	The individual self participates in his environment, or in the case of complete individualization, in his world. Man participates in the universe through the rational structure of mind and reality. When individualization reaches the perfect form we call a "person," participation reaches the perfect form we call "communion." The polarity of individualization and participation solves the problem of nominalism and realism.	The individual self participates in his environment or, in the case of complete individualization, in his world. . . . Man participates in the universe through the rational structure of mind and reality. . . .
In the polarity of individualization and participation Tillich finds a solution to the endless problem of nominalism and realism.		When individualization reaches the perfect form which we call a "person," participation reaches the perfect form which we call "communion." . . .

George Washington Davis confidentially wrote that King had "exceptional intellectual ability—discriminating mind." While King would make "an excellent minister or teacher," Davis wrote he had "the mind for the latter." Morton Scott Enslin, another Crozer professor, regarded King as

a very able man. All is grist that comes to his mill. Hard working, fertile minded, rarely misses anything which he can subsequently use. He will probably become a big strong man among his people.¹⁴

King's record at Boston University was not as stellar as his Crozer record, but he nonetheless completed his doctoral studies at a rapid pace even after taking a full-time pastoral position. When his doctoral adviser, L. Harold DeWolf, read the first draft of his dissertation, he noted King's failure to explain the "presuppositions and

Luther King, Jr., Feb. 23, 1951, Crozer Theological Seminary Records (Colgate-Rochester Divinity School, Rochester, N.Y.). Batten also publicly described King as "doing superior work," possessing "an excellent mind" and "a thorough grasp of material," and as being a person "held universally in high regard by faculty, staff, and students." See Charles E. Batten, "Martin L. King," *The Achievements of Morehouse Men in the Great Universities* (Atlanta, 1951).

¹³ King, "Comparison of Conceptions," 73–74; John Herman Randall, Jr., "The Ontology of Paul Tillich," in *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, ed. Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (New York, 1952), 154. The passage is unattributed, although the context makes clear that the ideas are Tillich's. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, 176–77.

¹⁴ George Washington Davis, "Crozer Theological Seminary Placement Committee: Confidential Evaluation of Martin Luther King, Jr.," Nov. 15, 1950, Crozer Records; Morton Scott Enslin, "Crozer Theological Seminary Placement Committee: Confidential Evaluation of Martin Luther King, Jr.," Nov. 21, 1950, *ibid.*

norms employed in the critical evaluation" of Tillich and Wieman. Nevertheless, he applauded King for approaching a "difficult" subject "with broad learning, impressive ability and convincing mastery of the works immediately involved." S. Paul Schilling, the second reader, remarked in the margin of an early draft that King had "inaccurately quoted" a Tillich text and had "almost exactly quoted" another paragraph without inserting quotation marks. Acknowledging that the dissertation was a first draft, Schilling stated that he would approve the dissertation "assuming that the changes indicated will be made." In his report on the first draft, he noted that King's research was "competently done" and that the dissertation was

carefully organized and systematically developed. The expository chapters are accurate, objective, and clear, presenting a true portrayal of the views of Tillich and Wieman. The writer seems to have made judicious use of all the available sources, which are considerable in extent. The comparisons and evaluations are fair-minded, balanced, and cogent. The author shows sound comprehension and critical capacity.¹⁵

During the winter and spring of 1955, King revised his dissertation draft and defended it before a committee of six faculty members, including DeWolf and Schilling. Although King did not correct all the errors pointed out by Schilling, the committee approved the thesis.

King's professors, therefore, scrutinized King's dissertation and his earlier essays, but they apparently saw no reason to question the papers' authenticity as representations of King's intellectual skills and religious views. Although the failure of King's teachers to notice his pattern of textual appropriation is somewhat remarkable in retrospect, they judged King's papers in the context of his effort to explicate the ideas of others.

Because the purpose of the King Project's research was not to investigate the appropriateness of King's citation practices, its annotations of King's papers do not attempt to decide whether specific passages in the dissertation or other student papers or these writings taken as a whole were plagiaries.¹⁶ The texts of the papers and other evidence indicate that King was aware of academic conventions regarding citation of sources. On one occasion at Boston, King even felt compelled to apologize in advance for a paper in which, because of a poor typist, footnotes were "in somewhat bad condition" and a block quotation had not been properly arranged. In his last semester of courses at Boston, King took Thesis and Dissertation Writing from Jannette E. Newhall, the librarian of the School of Theology. One of Newhall's lectures was "Quotations and footnotes. Primary and secondary sources. Paraphrases." In 1953, the Boston University Graduate School registrar sent to King the school's

¹⁵ L. Harold DeWolf, First Reader's Report on Dissertation by Martin Luther King, Jr., Feb. 26, 1955 (in S. Paul Schilling's possession); S. Paul Schilling, Second Reader's Report on Dissertation by Martin Luther King, Jr., Feb. 26, 1955, *ibid.*; Martin Luther King, Jr., "Draft of Chapter 3," folder 18, box 96A, King Papers (Mugar Library). King wrote and revised the dissertation during his first year as pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. He made few changes to the dissertation after drafting it.

¹⁶ The published volumes include extensive annotations consisting of quotations of corresponding passages found in texts that King probably consulted.

regulations for doctoral candidates. Among its requirements were several regarding citations:

The completed dissertation is to be fully annotated and documented. Every statement for which the student is not personally responsible, whether it is in the form of a direct or an indirect quotation, is to be supported by a footnote. . . . This footnote should identify the source of the information including page reference, if possible.

King's statement in his dissertation that he would acknowledge his sources "by appropriate footnotes" indicates his awareness of this requirement, despite his failure to abide by it consistently. His academic papers, including the dissertation, contain numerous passages that meet a strict definition of plagiarism — that is, *any* unacknowledged appropriation of words or ideas.¹⁷

The available documentary evidence does not provide a definitive answer to the question whether King deliberately violated the standards that applied to him as a student. The King Project found no direct evidence that King was aware of any ethical deficiencies in his compositional practices or felt any concern that his compositions might violate academic rules. King's decisions to retain his graduate school papers and to deposit them in an archive at Boston University where they would be available to scholars suggest his lack of conscious guilt or embarrassment regarding his unacknowledged textual appropriations. Understanding the reasons for or the significance of King's pattern of textual appropriations will require careful examination of King's student years within a broader biographical and historical context.

¹⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., to Edgar S. Brightman, [Dec. 6, 1951], folder 26, box 114, King Papers (Mugar Library); Jannette E. Newhall, "Syllabus, Thesis and Dissertation Writings," [Feb. 4, 1953–May 22, 1953], folder 31, box 115, *ibid.*; Boston University, "Regulations on the Preparation of the Dissertation for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy," April 1953, enclosed in Bessie A. Ring to Graduate School Faculty and Candidates for the Ph.D. degree, Oct. 9, 1953 (in Coretta Scott King's possession).

Appendix

Annotations to King's dissertation

King's Application to Graduate School

In late 1950, Martin Luther King, Jr., applied for admission to the Ph.D. program at Boston University. The following paragraphs form part of that application.¹

For a number of years I have been desirous of teaching in a college or a school of religion. Realizing the necessity for scholastic attainment in the teaching profession, I feel that graduate work would give me a better grasp of my field. At present I have a general knowledge of my field, but I have not done the adequate research to [meet] the scholarly issues with which I will be confronted in [this] area. It is my candid opinion that the teaching of theology should be as scientific, as thorough, and as realistic as any other discipline. In a word, scholarship is my goal. For this reason I am desirous of doing graduate work. I feel that a few years of intensified study in a graduate school will give me a thorough grasp of knowledge in my field.

My particular interest in Boston University can be summed up in two statements. First my thinking in philosophical areas has been greatly influenced by some of the faculty members there, particularly Dr. Brightman. For this reason I have longed for the possibility of studying under him. Secondly, one of my present professors [Raymond J. Bean] is a graduate of Boston University, and his great influence over me has turned my eyes toward his former school. From him I have gotten some valuable information about Boston University, and I have been convinced that there are definite advantages there for me.

Excerpt from King's Dissertation, with Preliminary Annotations by the King Project

The following pages are excerpted from chapter 2 of Martin Luther King's dissertation, "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman." The footnotes at the bottom of each page contain annotations prepared by the Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers Project. These annotations are preliminary and may differ from those that will be part of the project's forthcoming work, *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Any spelling or grammatical

¹ S. Paul Schilling graciously provided this document and the first and second readers' reports on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dissertation (which appear below) to the *Journal of American History*. We thank him for this courtesy.

errors made by King are transcribed verbatim in this excerpt. Brackets in the text contain the footnotes that appear in the dissertation itself. A key to the abbreviations used in the brackets follows.

Abbreviations

Tillich, Art. (1935) Tillich, Paul. "What Is Wrong with Dialectical Theology." *Journal of Religion*, 15 (April 1935).

Tillich, IOH —. *The Interpretation of History*. Trans. By N. A. Rosetzki and Elsa L. Talmey. New York: Scribner's, 1936.

Tillich, PE —. *The Protestant Era*. Trans. by J. L. Adams. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948.

Tillich, RS —. *The Religious Situation*. Trans. by H. R. Niebuhr. New York: Holt, 1932.

Tillich, ST —. *Systematic Theology*. Vol. I. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951.

CHAPTER II

THE METHODOLOGIES OF TILLICH AND WIEMAN

The question of theological method has been much discussed during the past century. Many hold that only as one settles this question can one expect to settle any other, for it underlies every other. Tillich and Wieman agree that the question of method is of fundamental importance, and both take pains to elaborate their methodologies.

Since the question of method is of such vital importance in theological construction, it is hardly possible to gain an adequate understanding of a theologian's basic thought without an understanding of his methodology. So we can best begin our study of the conceptions of God held by Tillich and Wieman by giving an exposition of their methodologies. We turn first to Tillich.

1. Tillich's method of correlation

Throughout his theology Tillich undertakes the difficult task of setting forth a systematic theology which is at the same time an apologetic. His aim is to show that the Christian message actually does answer the questions which modern man is being forced to ask about his existence, his salvation and his destiny.

Tillich's theology is quite frankly a dialogue between classical Christianity and modern man. In this it is analogous to the work of the second century apologists who mediated between Christianity and late classical culture.

The method used to effect this apologetic task is the "method of correlation." In Tillich's first book entitled, *Das System der Wissenschaften nach Gegenständen und Methoden* ("The System of Knowledge: Its Contents and Its Methods"), theology

is defined as "theonomous metaphysics." This definition was Tillich's first step toward what he now calls the method of correlation. In the method of correlation Tillich seeks to overcome the conflict between the naturalistic and supernaturalistic methods, a conflict which he thinks imperils real progress in the work of systematic theology and also imperils any possible effect of theology on the secular world. The method of correlation shows the interdependence between the ultimate questions to which philosophy is driven and the answers given in the Christian message.¹

Philosophy cannot answer ultimate or existential questions *qua* philosophy. If the philosopher tries to answer them . . . he becomes a theologian. And, conversely, theology cannot answer these questions without accepting their presuppositions and implications. [Footnote: Tillich, PE, xxvi.]

In this method question and answer determine each other; if they are separated, the traditional answers become unintelligible, and the actual questions remain unanswered. Philosophy and theology are not separated, and they are not identical, but they are correlated.² Such a method seeks to be dialectical in the true sense of the word. In order to gain a clearer understanding of this method of correlation it is necessary to discuss its negative meaning.

i. The negative meaning of correlation

Tillich's method of correlation replaces three inadequate methods of relating the contents of the Christian faith to man's spiritual existence. These inadequate methods are referred to as supranaturalistic, naturalistic or humanistic, and dualistic. We turn first to a discussion of the supranaturalistic method.

(1) Supranaturalism

The supranaturalistic method sees the Christian message as a "sum of revealed truths which have fallen into the human situation like strange bodies from a strange world." [Footnote: Tillich, ST, I, 64.] The chief error in this method is found in its failure to place any emphasis on an analysis of the human situation. According to this method the truths of the Christian faith create a new situation before they can be received. At many points the supranaturalistic method has traits of the docetic-monophysitic heresy, especially in its valuation of the Bible as a book of supranatural "oracles" in which human receptivity is completely overlooked.³ This method finally

¹ Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, trans. J. L. Adams (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. xxvi: "The method of correlation shows, at every point of Christian thought, the interdependence between the ultimate questions to which philosophy (as well as pre-philosophical thinking) is driven and the answers given in the Christian message."

² Tillich, *Protestant Era*, p. xxvi: "Question and answer determine each other; if they are separated, the traditional answers become unintelligible, and the actual questions remain unanswered. . . . Philosophy and theology are not separated, and they are not identical, but they are correlated, and their correlation is the methodological problem of a Protestant theology."

³ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), vol. 1, p. 65: "In terms of the classical heresies one could say that the supranaturalistic method has docetic-monophysitic traits, especially in its valuation of the Bible as a book of supranatural 'oracles' in which human receptivity is completely overlooked."

ends up seeking to put man in the impossible position of receiving answers to questions he never has asked.

It is chiefly at this point that Tillich criticizes Barth. Tillich is strongly opposed to anything of a heteronomous character.⁴ [Footnote: Tillich uses the term heteronomous in relation to "autonomy" and "theonomy." Autonomy means the obedience of the individual to the law of reason, which he finds in himself as a rational being.⁵ Heteronomy means imposing an alien law, religious or secular on man's mind. Theonomy is a kind of higher autonomy. "It means autonomous reason united with its own depth . . . and actualized in obedience to its structural laws and in the power of its own inexhaustible ground." (ST, I, 85.)] A completely foreign substance or authority, suddenly thrown at man could have no meaning to him.⁶

Revelation would not be even a divine possibility if it could not be received by means of forms of culture as human phenomena. It would be a destructive foreign substance in culture, a disruptive "non-human" entity within the human sphere, and could have had no power to shape and direct human history. [Footnote: Tillich, Art. (1935), 140.]

Tillich says in an even sharper criticism of Barth:

The "Grand Inquisitor" is about to enter the Confessional Church, and strictly speaking, with a strong but tightfitting armor of Barthian Supranaturalism. This very narrow attitude of the Barthians saved the German Protestant Church; but it created at the same time a new heteronomy, an anti-autonomous and anti-humanistic feeling, which I must regard as an abnegation of the Protestant principle. [Footnote: Tillich, IOH, 26.]

In his *Systematic Theology* Tillich sets forth his criticism of Barth in still clearer terms. All theology as he sees it, has a dual function: to state the basic truth of the Christian faith and to interpret this truth in the existing cultural situation. In other words, theology has both a "kerygmatic" and an "apologetic" function. Barth's theology performs the first of these tasks admirably. By lifting the message above any frozen formula from the past, and above the very words of the Scripture, Barth has been able to recover the great recurrent refrain that runs through all Scripture and Christian teaching. But he refuses, with the most persistent pertinacity, to undertake the apologetic task of interpreting the message in the contemporary situation. "The message must be thrown at those in the situation — thrown like a stone." [Footnote: Tillich, ST, I, 7.] Tillich is convinced, on the contrary, that it is the unavoidable duty of the theologian to interpret the message in the cultural situation of his day. Barth persists in avoiding this function, thus falling into a dogmatic "supranaturalism".

⁴ Jack Boozer, "The Place of Reason in Paul Tillich's Conception of God" (Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1952), p. 97: "Tillich is strongly critical of anything of a heteronomous character."

⁵ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 84: "Autonomy means the obedience of the individual to the law of reason, which he finds in himself as a rational being."

⁶ Boozer, "Place of Reason," p. 97: "A completely foreign substance or authority suddenly thrown at man could have no meaning to man." The two quotations from Tillich that follow this sentence appear in the same form in Boozer.

All of this makes it clear that Tillich is adverse to all supranaturalistic methods. His method of correlation, the basis of his whole theology, is expressly designed to avoid the pitfalls of supranaturalism without falling back into idealistic liberalism.

(2) Naturalism

The method of naturalism is the second method that Tillich rejects as inadequate for relating the contents of the Christian faith to man's spiritual existence. Naturalism tends to affirm that the answers can be developed out of human existence itself. Tillich asserts that much of liberal theology fell victim to this type of naturalistic or humanistic thinking. The tendency was to put question and answer on the same level of creativity. "Everything was said by man, nothing to man." [Footnote: Tillich, ST, I, 65.]

Naturalism teaches that there is only one dimension in life, the horizontal dimension. There is no God who speaks to man beyond human existence. There is no vertical relationship whatsoever. Whatever is in man completely.⁷

But this tendency to see everything in terms of the natural is as much an error as to see everything in terms of the supernatural.⁸ The error that Tillich finds in naturalism generally is its failure to see that human existence itself is the question.⁹ It fails to see, moreover, that the "answers must come from beyond existence." [Footnote: Tillich, ST, I, 65.] It is partially right in what it affirms; it is partially wrong in what it denies.¹⁰

(3) Dualism

The third method to be rejected by Tillich is called the "dualistic" method. Dualism seeks to build a supranatural structure on a natural substructure. It divides theology into natural theology and supranatural theology. Tillich admits that this method, more than any other, is aware of the problem which the method of correlation tries to meet. It realizes that in spite of the infinite gap between man's spirit and God's spirit, there must be a positive relation between them. It tries to express this relation by positing a body of theological truth which man can reach through so-called "natural revelation".¹¹ And herein lies the falsity of this method; it derives

⁷ Boozer, "Place of Reason," p. 262: "Humanism teaches that there is only one dimension in life, the horizontal dimension. . . . There are no absolute norms, there is no God who speaks to man from beyond man's existence. There is no vertical relationship whatsoever. Whatever is in man completely."

⁸ Boozer, "Place of Reason," p. 263: "To see everything in terms of the natural is as much an error as to see everything in terms of the supernatural."

⁹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 65: "It develops its answer out of human existence, unaware that human existence itself is the question."

¹⁰ Boozer, "Place of Reason," p. 263: "Each is partially right in what it affirms, each is partially wrong in what it denies."

¹¹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 65: "The third method to be rejected can be called 'dualistic,' inasmuch as it builds a supranatural structure on a natural substructure. This method, more than others, is aware of the problem which the method of correlation tries to meet. It realizes that, in spite of the infinite gap between man's spirit and God's spirit, there must be a positive relation between them. It tries to express this relation by positing a body of theological truth which man can reach through his own efforts or, in terms of a self-contradictory expression, through 'natural revelation'."

an answer from the form of the question. Like the naturalistic method, dualism fails to see that the answers must always come from something beyond existence. [Footnote: Tillich, ST, I, 65.]

It is essentially at this point that Tillich criticises so-called natural revelation. There is revelation through nature, but there is no natural revelation. Natural revelation, if distinguished from revelation through nature, is a contradiction in terms, for if it is natural knowledge, it is not revelation. Natural knowledge cannot lead to the revelation of the ground of being. It can lead only to the question of the ground of being. But this question is asked neither by natural revelation nor by natural theology. It is the question raised by reason, but reason cannot answer it. Only revelation can answer it. And this answer is based on neither natural revelation nor natural theology, but on real revelation.¹² "Natural theology and, even more definitely, natural revelation are misnomers for the negative side of the revelation of the mystery, for an interpretation of the shock and stigma of nonbeing." [Footnote: Tillich, ST, I, 120.]

Tillich is quite certain that the method of correlation solves the historical and systematic riddle that has been set forth by the method of dualism. It solves it by resolving so-called natural theology into the analysis of existence and by resolving so-called supranatural theology into the answers given to the questions implied in existence.¹³

ii. The positive meaning of correlation

We now turn to a discussion of the positive meaning of the method of correlation. The term "correlation" can be used in three ways. It can designate the correspondence of data; it can designate the logical interdependence of concepts, as in polar relations; and it can designate the real interdependence of things or events in structural wholes. In theological construction all three meanings have important implications.¹⁴ We shall discuss each of these meanings respectively. Then, in order to gain a clearer understanding of the method of correlation, we may go on to discuss how systematic theology proceeds in using the method of correlation, and how theology is related to philosophy.

¹² Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 119-120: "Natural revelation," if distinguished from revelation through nature, is a contradiction in terms, for if it is natural knowledge it is not revelation, and if it is revelation it makes nature ecstatic and miraculous. Natural knowledge about self and world cannot lead to the revelation of the ground of being. It can lead to the question of the ground of being, and that is what so-called natural theology can do and must do. But this question is asked neither by natural revelation nor by natural theology. It is the question of reason about its own ground and abyss. It is asked by reason, but reason cannot answer it. Revelation can answer it. And this answer is based neither on a so-called natural revelation nor on a so-called natural theology. It is based on real revelation, on ecstasy and sign-events."

¹³ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 65-66: "The method of correlation solves this historical and systematic riddle by resolving natural theology into the analysis of existence and by resolving supranatural theology into the answers given to the questions implied in existence."

¹⁴ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 60: "The term 'correlation' may be used in three ways. It can designate the correspondence of different series of data, as in statistical charts; it can designate the logical interdependence of concepts, as in polar relations; and it can designate the real interdependence of things or events in structural wholes. If the term is used in theology, all three meanings have important applications."

(1) The correspondence of data

Correlation means correspondence of data in the sense of a correspondence between religious symbols and that which is symbolized by them. It is upon the assumption of this correspondence that all utterances about God's nature are made. This correspondence is actual in the *logos* nature of God and the *logos* nature of man.¹⁵ There is an understandable contact between God and man because of this common *logos* nature.

But one cannot stop here because God is always more than ground or reason; God is also abyss. This abyss-nature of God makes it impossible for man ever to speak about God except in symbolic terms.¹⁶ Since this idea of the symbol is such a basic facet of Tillich's thought, we must briefly discuss its meaning.

Tillich regards every theological expression as being a symbolic utterance. Since the unconditional is "forever hidden, transcendent and unknowable, it follows that all religious ideas are symbolical." [Footnote: Tillich, RS, x.] No finite word, form, person or deed can ever be identified with God. There is an infinite gap between man and God. [Footnote: Tillich, ST, I, 65.]

First Reader's Report

BOSTON UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL
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FIRST READER'S REPORT

AUTHOR OF DISSERTATION: Martin L. King

TITLE OF PAPER: A COMPARISON OF THE CONCEPTIONS OF GOD IN THE THINKING OF PAUL TILLICH AND HENRY NELSON WIEMAN

CRITICAL ESTIMATE OF FIRST DRAFT

Mr. King's dissertation serves the purpose of showing many significant relations between two unusually influential theologians, each of whom maintains a remarkably original and unique point of view. The position of neither is simple and Tillich's writing is sufficiently difficult so that there are wide differences of interpretation among his foremost admirers and critics. Hence Mr. King's task is a difficult one.

¹⁵ Boozer, "Place of Reason," p. 265: "(1) Correspondence of data. Correlation means correspondence of data in the sense of a correspondence between religious symbols and that which is symbolized by them. It is upon the assumption of this correspondence that all utterances about God's nature are made. This correspondence is actual in the *logos*-nature of God and the *logos*-nature of man." See also Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 60: "There is a correlation in the sense of correspondence between religious symbols and that which is symbolized by them."

¹⁶ Boozer, "Place of Reason," p. 266: "There is a problem here because God is always more than ground or reason, God is also abyss. The abyss-nature of God makes it impossible for man ever to speak about God except in symbolic terms."

In general, he approaches it with broad learning, impressive ability and convincing mastery of the works immediately involved.

The First Reader has read most of the chapters, one by one, and sent his criticisms to the candidate. These criticisms, most of them formal or minor, will not be repeated here. The whole dissertation must be gone over with care for the correction of the form. Mr. King has shown himself well able to carry out this assignment.

The most conspicuous weakness of the present draft is the lack of an Abstract. This is the most important part of a dissertation. It must be prepared and presented sufficiently early so that it can be criticized and revised before the Final Draft is due. The candidate is warned that often several revisions of the Abstract are required. Ample time must be allowed.

Within the main body of the dissertation, my chief criticism is the lack of a clear statement setting forth the presuppositions and norms employed in the critical evaluation. Generally the main norm seems to be adequacy in expressing the historic Christian faith—or perhaps the religious *values* of historic Christianity. Sometimes it is a more inclusive intellectual or philosophical adequacy. The norms should be more explicit in systematic statement. If it could be shown that Tillich and Wieman themselves claim to measure up to the standards by which they are here criticized, that demonstration would greatly strengthen the criticism by showing it to be internal and not merely external.

Some further criticisms of specific passages follow, with page references.

P. 219. Are these procedures of Tillich and Wieman actually parallel to Anselm's ontological argument? It should, at least, be pointed out that Anselm sought to prove the existence of the being with richest conceivable attributes, while Wieman and Tillich seek to prove by definition "a being of minimum specifications." In other words, Anselm sought to prove by a definition with maximum specification of attributes, while Tillich and Wieman seek to prove by definitions with minimum specifications.

P. 224, section 3. Do not most theologians think that God is ground or author of all being and source of all good? How does Tillich's dilemma regarding evil differ from the dilemma of other theists?

P. 226, section 5. Compare *The Christian Century* editorial review of Wieman, *The Source of Human Good*, characterizing his view as "cosmic behaviorism."

P. 247, 8th to 6th line from bottom. Relate to the doctrine of personal immortality?

When revised in response to these criticisms and to self-criticism, Mr. Martin's work promises to be an excellent and useful scholarly achievement.

The dissertation is approved, subject to revision as indicated.

First Reader's Signature [signed: L. Harold DeWolf]

Date: Feb. 26, 1955.

NOTE: The First Reader is requested to return the dissertation, with his report (preferably typewritten, in duplicate), to the office of the Graduate School on or before Thursday, March 3.

Second Reader's Report

BOSTON UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL
BOSTON 15, MASSACHUSETTS

SECOND READER'S REPORT

AUTHOR OF DISSERTATION: Martin L. King

TITLE OF PAPER: A COMPARISON OF THE CONCEPTIONS OF GOD IN THE THINKING OF PAUL TILLICH AND HENRY NELSON WIEMAN

CRITICAL ESTIMATE OF FIRST DRAFT

This piece of research has been competently done. It is carefully organized and systematically developed. The expository chapters are accurate, objective, and clear, presenting a true portrayal of the views of Tillich and Wieman. The writer seems to have made judicious use of all the available sources, which are considerable in extent. The comparisons and evaluations are fair-minded, balanced, and cogent. The author shows sound comprehension and critical capacity.

Stylistic improvement is needed at various points. Since the entire dissertation, except Chapter VI, has already been read chapter by chapter, the reader lists here only those items not previously listed or so far uncorrected (mostly because of lack of time). Particularly in Chapter IV the construction at various points is awkward, rough, or ungrammatical. Presumably these lacks will be corrected in the second draft.

Among various suggestions regarding content made previously to Mr. King, one may be mentioned here: the desirability of including in Chapter IV a discussion of Wieman's use of specifically Christian symbols in his conception of God. This aspect of his thought should be brought out clearly.

The reader is appending a list of needed corrections, to be added to those previously pointed out. The present list concerns mainly Chapter I, II, and VI.

As a first draft, and assuming that the changes indicated will be made, the manuscript is approved.

The dissertation is approved.

Second Reader's Signature [signed: S. Paul Schilling]

Date: Feb. 26, 1955.

NOTE: The Second Reader is requested to return the dissertation, with his report (preferably typewritten, in duplicate), to the office of the Graduate School on or before Thursday, March 3.