
Ecumenical Influences: Wartburg Theological Seminary, Paul Tillich, and Roman Catholic Theologians

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The 1960s were a time of unexpected and considerable changes in society and in Christian churches. In the autumn of 1961, ecumenism arose as a new and unexpected movement that both began to influence Christianity in the United States and profoundly shaped my career, as the following narrative tells. Emerging in a country long marked by prejudice, that time of ecclesial change had been prepared for by meetings of the World Council of Churches, and it would find Roman Catholic support in the Ecumenical Council, Vatican II, which was then beginning.

Ecumenism in Iowa

The ecumenical movement visited Iowa early on. I was ending my years of study for the priesthood in September 1961, when a first-year Lutheran seminarian at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque walked to the Dominican house of studies (the Aquinas Institute) and inquired about taking a course there. Although this was a journey of about one mile, that afternoon he passed through four centuries, from the Protestant Reformation of the 1500s all the way to the 1960s, moving through periods of hostility between Catholics and Protestants. Relatively soon after that, seminarians began to establish contacts between the Roman Catholic Aquinas Institute and nearby Wartburg Seminary (Lutheran) and the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary (Presbyterian). The three Dubuque seminaries then pursued institutional cooperation through shared library purchases, registration, summer sessions, and classes taught by teachers from the different faculties. These three theological schools, along with the School of Religion at the University of Iowa, founded the Association of Theological Faculties in Iowa in June 1965.¹

An intense restoration of medieval thought had taken place in the Roman Catholic Church from 1850 to 1950. During the decades around and after 1900, ecclesiastical and educational authorities sought to impose a “neo-scholasticism,” in which no other ways of thinking were to be tolerated than rigid presentations of older Greek and medieval philosophies. For some, this was a “Thomism” derived from the writings of Thomas Aquinas. Poor summaries of the Dominican’s metaphysics were to provide the standard against which every Catholic intellectual movement

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was measured. Given such a situation, it is not surprising that around 1960 American Protestants largely viewed the Catholic Church as a warehouse of antique rites and pieties. In Europe, however, theologians both Protestant and Catholic had for some decades found ways beyond the Baroque and the Enlightenment into the modern world.

The influence of Paul Tillich

Contacts with Wartburg Seminary by Aquinas Institute students led them to meet a young and energetic professor named William Weiblen. Weiblen had been a graduate of Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa, and of Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque. He earned a master’s degree from Harvard Divinity School and a doctorate from the University in Erlangen-Nuremberg in Germany. Before teaching at Wartburg Seminary, he had served as a pastor of Lutheran congregations and as a chaplain in the U.S. Air Force. Several years after his first ecumenical contacts with Aquinas Institute, Weiblen was chosen to serve as Wartburg Seminary’s president.

Years later, it occurred to me that Weiblen’s influence on the students and faculty of Aquinas Institute had extended in remarkable ways. Having taken an early interest in the Catholic seminarians and faculty, he introduced them in turn to the thought of Martin Luther and to the twentieth-century theology of Paul Tillich, from whom Weiblen had taken several classes at Harvard Divinity School.

1. See, O'Meara, “Ecumenical Beginnings in the Midwest,” *Lutheran Partners* 9, 1 (February 1993), 11-13.

Weiblen saw that beyond his identity as a liberal Protestant German theologian, Paul Tillich's thought could constructively engage Roman Catholicism, especially in light of the new ecumenical movement. At that time, Catholic seminarians were asking questions about theology and the tremendous amount of time they spent studying it. The typical subjects of study were largely philosophical and had little connection to American society—and perhaps little connection to Jesus' teaching, as well! To such a situation, Tillich offered a different fundamental perspective with his method of “correlation.” For Tillich, a correlation of God's revelation to a specific age brought together two poles: the first was the revelation of God; the second was the situation addressed by the Christian teacher or minister. “Theology, as a function of the Christian Church, must serve the needs of the Church. A theological system is supposed to satisfy two basic needs: the statement of the heart of the Christian message and the interpretation of this truth for every new generation.”²

Had not this view of theology, which was both pastoral and cultural, been the theological method of great theologians? Aquinas himself, in his prologue to the *Summa theologiae* described the situation he faced as a teacher in a medieval educational system that he found to be repetitive, disorganized, and boring. Aquinas interpreted faith through Aristotelian science at the universities of Paris and Naples in the thirteenth century, just as Tillich in Frankfurt or Manhattan approached religion and revelation through twentieth-century existentialism. David Tracy of the University of Chicago later said in summary, “Tillich's method of correlation deserves the explicit, and more often implicit, victory it has gained in contemporary theology.... Every theology as interpretation involves application to a situation.”³ For Catholics in the 1960s, however, the correlation of people and Gospel would mean significant alterations to theological education and ministry.

To his credit, Paul Tillich had not been hostile to Catholicism, which many of America's Puritan-descended churches at the time were. The Catholic ethos, Tillich wrote, does tend to a “heteronomy,” a subjection of people to church authority and cultural isolation; additionally, Catholicism and its focus on “Catholic substance” can be guilty of confusing the human with the divine. At the same time, Tillich observed that Protestantism could end up providing little more than austere criticism, resulting in an abstracted faith where free autonomy became individualism. “The Protestant principle is an expression of the conquest of religion by the Spiritual Presence and consequently an expression of the victory over the ambiguities of religion, its profanization, and its demonization... It alone is not enough; it needs the ‘Catholic substance,’ the concrete embodiment of the Spiritual Presence.”⁴ Both traditions sought maturity in “theonomy,” a transparency of

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the cultural form to the divine, of the existential to “New Being” or the “Power of Being.” The Catholic substance is not a particular church or past tradition. It is deeper and richer, lying beneath the history of Christianity. While this can be buried or distorted, it seeks to manifest itself in new, attractive ways, in what is concrete in human religion.

In Tillich's view, church, liturgy, and belief emerge from cultures. “Religion and culture are not separate. While much of human life stops short of revelatory experiences, both religion and culture lead to the depth-questions.”⁵ Art and theology are related: both employ the forms of a particular age, and time flows through both art and theology. In human history, theology—like culture—has new and catalytic moments, which Tillich described by using the Greek word *kairos* that indicates a certain fullness of time. While living in Berlin during the 1920s, for instance, Tillich had founded a Kairos Circle: a group that believed that beneath philosophy, art, politics, and theology is a seminal, dynamic epoch, the unique way a particular period encounters reality. “Religion is the directedness of the spirit toward unconditioned meaning; culture is the directedness of the spirit toward conditioned forms... As the substance of culture is religion, so the form of religion is culture.”⁶

Tillich's theology in Dubuque

Tillich's theology, which several of us encountered through Dr. Weiblen, helped American Catholic teachers and theologians make sense of their church and its current context. Vatican II accepted that “the human race in reflecting on its destiny has become one, and it has passed from a static concept of reality to a more dynamic, evolutionary one.”⁷ Theology was now free to exist in history, and not only in medieval timelessness. Indeed, it

2. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Volume 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 3.

3. David Tracy, “Tillich and Contemporary Theology,” in *The Thought of Paul Tillich* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 263.

4. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Volume 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 245.

5. Paul Tillich, *What is Religion?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 72.

6. Tillich, *What is Religion?*, 72-73.

7. W. Abbott, ed., “The Church Today,” *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1966) 203.

was history and culture that vivified Christian teaching and community across the ages.

Surprisingly, by the 1950s, only a very few Catholics had written essays on Paul Tillich.⁸ In 1962 it occurred to me that a volume of essays on him could be collected from articles written by Roman Catholic theologians, American as well as European. Another Dominican in Dubuque, Donald Weisser, helped in the production of the book.⁹ Weisser contacted Tillich himself (then at the University of Chicago) about writing a response to these essays, and he agreed with enthusiasm to do this. Tillich worked on "An Afterword: Appreciation and Reply" during the first months of 1964; he wrote down some of his responses even when he was occasionally hospitalized. Our collection, *Paul Tillich in Catholic Thought*, appeared in late autumn 1964. Heywood Thomas, a Welsh theologian whose *Paul Tillich: An Appraisal*¹⁰ had just been published, wrote the Foreword.

The publisher, The Priory Press, sponsored a reception for the book in Hyde Park, Chicago, which Tillich attended. In those early days of ecumenism in America, this was a publicized event. Tillich's Afterword, which due to his death in 1965 is among the last of his many writings, ended with the words:

I did this reply with the same joy about a fruitful dialogue with which I read the articles. One thing I learned in doing so is the necessity that we learn more about each other's thought, the classical as well as the contemporary... Only the divine Spirit and historical providence can overcome the splits amongst those representing the Spiritual Community which transcends every particular church and every particular religious group. A dialogue, done in "listening love," can be a tool of providence and a channel of the divine Spirit.¹¹

A British publisher issued the book in England and eventually an American publisher issued a slightly revised version in a popular paperback.

Tillich's Ongoing Influence among Roman Catholic Theologians

Dominicans connected to Aquinas Institute such as O'Meara [this author], Donald Weisser, Christopher Kiesling, and Richard

8. Surprisingly there was an early article from 1959 by a German Jesuit, Erich Przywara, in W. Leibrecht, *Religion and Culture: Essays in Honor of Paul Tillich* (New York, Harper, 1959). Przywara and Tillich had discussions that were featured at intellectual symposia at Davos, Switzerland, in the 1920s; see, "Paul Tillich und Erich Przywara in Davos," *Davoser Revue* 78 (März, 2003), 18-22; and "Paul Tillich and Erich Przywara," *Gregorianum* 87/2 (2006), 227-238.

9. See, Celestin Donald Weisser, O.P., "Paul Tillich: A Roman Catholic Appreciation," *Christian Advocate* 11 (February 1966), 7-9.

10. Heywood Thomas, *Paul Tillich: An Appraisal* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1966).

11. Thomas O'Meara, Celestin D. Weisser, eds., *Paul Tillich in Catholic Thought* (Chicago: Priory Press, 1964; London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1964; Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image Books, 1969).

Tillich had been speaking of a new ecumenical moment, "a *kairos*, a moment full of potentialities, in Protestant-Catholic relations." ... Over the years, theologians found an affinity between Roman Catholicism and Tillich's theology in four areas: philosophies and theologies in history, culture, sacramentality, and mysticism.

Woods were marked by learning from Tillich. Additionally, the Jesuit Gustav Weigel saw Tillich as a highpoint in contemporary Protestant theology; for him, Tillich was of particular interest to Catholics because of his appreciation of the history of philosophy and his view of theology as seeking to make Christianity coherent to today's world. Weigel's first article on Tillich appeared in 1950. A second pioneer of appreciating Tillich was the French theologian Georges Tavard, who was living in the United States. He praised Tillich's system as not Calvinist or Evangelical but as a correlation between existential life and the Gospel. With Tillich, the Roman Catholic Church was pursuing new directions.

Tillich had been speaking of a new ecumenical moment, "a *kairos*, a moment full of potentialities, in Protestant-Catholic relations."¹² This would reawaken a Catholicism anesthetized by a timeless ontology. Over the years, theologians found an affinity between Roman Catholicism and Tillich's theology in four areas: philosophies and theologies in history, culture, sacramentality, and mysticism. Tillich accepted the emergence of Christian theologies as fashioned by cultures and philosophies in their historical ages. These correlations aimed at being theonomies of divine being manifest in the narrative of humanity and the Christ. "Theonomy" is similar to the "sacramentality" of Roman Catholicism. Theonomy disclosed New Being in modes of revelation, in communities and churches, even in religions where it was "latent." Correlation was cultural: it was not a dictated divine message, not revelatory answers to human, existential questions. Instead, correlation sought out the thought-forms of a cultural era, in which a distinct but never fully separate revelation could be expressed. At the same time, Tillich's cultural thought included aspects of the mystical.

The influence among Roman Catholics from a Lutheran faculty and students in terms of Paul Tillich spread further in the 1960s and 1970s. Younger theologians wrote articles and doctoral dissertations on him. Among these was Ronald Modras' study of

12. O'Meara and C. Weisser, "Introduction," *Paul Tillich in Catholic Thought*, xxi.

ecclesiology directed by Hans Küng at Tübingen. The Franciscan Kenan Osborne brought Tillich to the Graduate Theological Union in California. Carl Armbruster published a widely read introduction to Tillich's thought, while Mary Ann Steger wrote a variety of publications in Protestant and Catholic circles.¹³ Later, Anthony Akinwale, a student in Canada and at Boston College, brought Tillich's work to the seminaries and theological schools in Nigeria that had been founded there by Dominicans from Dubuque.¹⁴

In 1979, James Luther Adams, Wilhelm Pauck, and other students of Tillich brought together several scholars for a meeting in New Harmony, Indiana. They pointed out a central theme: "God is Being-Itself, but not a spatialized supreme 'highest being' above other beings. When religion is authentic, it is openness to and directedness toward unconditional reality and proclaims its power and promise."¹⁵ In the year's after Tillich's death, the role of his thought in dialogue with Christian churches and world religions was prominently treated.¹⁶ Essays from that gathering noted Tillich's relationship to Catholicism after Vatican II, for instance, in the theologies of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Karl Rahner, and Gustavo Gutierrez.¹⁷

Over time, members of the American Academy of Religion formed the North American Paul Tillich Society. That ecumenical group looked at the implications of his theology in the past and in the future. In 1994, Raymond Bulman and Frederick Parella edited *Paul Tillich: A New Catholic Assessment*¹⁸ as a successor to the earlier volume edited in Dubuque. Essays by theologians from North America to India were included. Where in the earlier volume Tillich himself had responded to the articles, here Langdon Gilkey—one of Tillich's influential students—was the commentator. Gilkey wrote, "Catholics now view Tillich on his own terms. Only with this new understanding of Tillich has it become possible to see what an immense help much of his thought could be not only for the Reformation but also for the preservation of Catholic theology in this new age, in the important enterprise of rethinking Catholic

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theology."¹⁹ Gilkey selected theonomy and sacrament, *kairos* and temporality, and heteronomy and autonomy as key topics for this ongoing enterprise.

In Canada, Jean Richard published extensively and directed a Research Group on Tillich at the Université Laval in Québec City, Canada, where he also hosted a 1967 international symposium observing the anniversary of Tillich's birth. Those addresses led to an internationally authored book of seven hundred pages.²⁰ Heinrich Fries, founder of an early ecumenical institute at the University of Munich, directed several dissertations on Tillich's thought in the 1960s.²¹ In Germany, of particular importance would be the Deutsche Paul-Tillich-Gesellschaft, with its newsletter surveying publications from around the world. In the past three decades there has been a renaissance of interest in German-speaking areas, including the work of Werner Schüßler, who has published texts on Tillich's first writings. Schüßler has also extensively considered how Tillich furthered the relationship between Catholicism and Protestantism in their basic orientations and how art and liturgy in Catholicism reflect culture and religion.²²

13. Carl Armbruster, *The Vision of Paul Tillich* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967); Mary Ann Stenger, "Rethinking *The Courage to Be* for American Culture Today," Thomas Bandy, ed., *Why Tillich? Why Now?* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2021), 30-50.

14. Anthony Akinwale, "Catholic Theology in Africa," L. Ayres, M. A. Volpe, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 890-904.

15. James Luther Adams, "Introduction," *The Thought of Paul Tillich* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 3.

16. See, O'Meara, "Tillich and the Catholic Substance," J. L. Adams, ed., *The Thought of Paul Tillich*, 290-306; Parella, "Tillich and American Theology," *Paul Tillich im Exil, Tillich Research*, 12 (2017), 251-267; "Tillich and Barth on the Church: A Catholic Perspective," M. Hébert, ed., *Paul Tillich and Karl Barth: Theological Dis/Agreements, Tillich Studien* 23 (Berlin: Lit, 2010), 115-133.

17. See O'Meara, "Paul Tillich and Karl Rahner: Similarities and Contrasts," *Gregorianum* 91/3 (2010): 443-459.

18. Raymond Bulman and Frederick Parella, eds., *Paul Tillich: A New Catholic Assessment* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1994). Bulman and Parella produced a further volume, *Religion in the New Millennium: Theology in the Spirit of Paul Tillich* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2001).

19. Langdon Gilkey, "A Protestant Response," *Paul Tillich: A New Catholic Assessment*, 289ff.

20. Michel Despland, Jean-Claude Petit, Jean Richard, eds., *Religion et Culture: actes du colloque international du centenaire Paul Tillich* (Paris: Cerf, 1987). At Lyons, a Francophone Tillich Society was established whose procedures published surveys of writings on Tillich in French. That society, in 2023, sponsored a conference in Africa. African theologians, men and women, interested in Tillich represented Catholic universities in Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, the Congo, and Rwanda.

21. For instance, O'Meara, "Theology and Philosophy as Presented in Paul Tillich's 'Gotteslehre.'" Doctoral Dissertation (Munich: Germany, Ludwig-Maximilians Universität, 1967); published as *Paul Tillich's Theology of God* (Dubuque, Iowa: Listening Press, 1970).

22. "Meine katholischen Freunde verstehen mich besser als meine protestantischen. Wie 'katholisch' ist Paul Tillich?," Ulrich Barth, Christian Danz, et al, eds., *Aufgeklärte Religion und Ihre Probleme* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 311-329. Concerning the first contacts

As mentioned above, some German and American theologians noticed the resemblance of Tillich's writings to those of important mystics. In Dubuque, Christopher Kiesling, O.P., had written already in 1967: "In its basic orientation, Tillich's theological thought is closer to St. John of the Cross than to St. Thomas Aquinas... If we are looking for counterparts to Tillich's mentality in Catholic theology, we should not go to dogmatic texts but to the books of ascetical-mystical theology, to the writings of the mystics themselves."²³ Schüssler's essays also consider the strains of the mystical in Tillich. And in an evaluation of Tillich for contemporary ecumenism, Frederick Parella wrote: "The mystical dimension of Tillich's theology is helpful to Catholic mystical theology because it placed mystical theology on its proper philosophical ground. It makes the mystical a dimension of every religious encounter and preserves the paradoxical relationship between the self and the divine."²⁴ Beginning with Friedrich Schelling and Romantic Idealism, transcendental-historical philosophies such as those taught by Tillich have indeed flowed at times into something resembling classical Christian mysticism.

Conclusion

Clearly, Tillich's thought has influenced Catholic theologians from Iowa to Africa. The French theologian Claude Geffré, student of Yves Congar and professor at the Institut Catholique in Paris, offers an imaginative conclusion to this survey by joining Tillich's early theological category of "Ultimate Concern" with the interpretation of religion, especially in how that concept can provide common language in contemporary dialogues between Christianity and the world religions. As a framework, the language of Ultimate Concern has provided an alternative to fundamental

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ism and devotionism, while also being broad enough to speak to the experiences of interfaith dialogue and the mutual encounter of world religions.²⁵

It is truly fascinating that Paul Tillich, who explored abstract atmospheres and realms as the basis of religion, offered ways in which Roman Catholicism—a tradition often prone to fixate on human authorities, concrete devotions, and limited ethnic practices—could find resources for deeper orientations. Just as fascinating is the observation that much of the Roman Catholic engagement with Tillich had its origins in the early ecumenical experiences of Catholics and Protestants that took place among the seminary communities of Dubuque, Iowa, in the 1960s.

with Tillich in Dubuque, the German theologian later wrote: "A collection of essays on Tillich's theology appears in the United States... One can truly call this a pioneering work of ecumenical theology." ("Katholische Tillich-Interpretationen," *Paul Tillich. Leben – Werk – Wirkung* [Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2007], 248).

23. Kiesling, "A Translation of Tillich's Idea of God," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 4 (Fall, 1967): 708.

24. Parella, "Paul Tillich and the Roman Catholic Mystical Tradition," G. Hummel, Doris Lax, eds., *Mystical Heritage in Tillich's Philosophical Theology*, *Tillich Studien* 3 (Berlin: Lit, 2000), 176.

25. Claude Geffré, "Paul Tillich and the Future of Interreligious Ecumenism," in *Paul Tillich: A New Catholic Assessment*, 283-285.