

Is the Holy Spirit Religious?

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Abstract. In both ecclesial discourse and personal religious practice, the church and religion are often imagined as existing outside secular culture and society. Through an exposition of Paul Tillich's theology of culture, Sára Tóth's article offers a more nuanced account of the relationship between religion and culture, one that resists a dualistic separation. For Tillich, the opposition between religion and culture, and between the sacred and the secular, is a consequence of the Fall. Human beings are therefore called to live in anticipation of ultimate fulfilment, when the presence of God will permeate the whole of culture. Tillich names this theonomy, understood as a reality that can already be partially realised through the Spirit.

Keywords: paul tillich; culture; culture and religion; protestantism; secularism

Reflections on Paul Tillich's Theology of Culture

The perennial intellectual and spiritual temptation of religious people is to imagine two separate spheres for religious and secular matters. It is as if the church and religion were somehow situated outside secular culture and society, and we were establishing contact with "the world" from another place, issuing our worldview and moral judgments, as well as carrying out mission from there. This places us in a continuous tension: whatever presents itself to us "from the world," whether a person or a phenomenon, must be judged, and we must either fight against it or make it the object of mission.

In Hungarian usage, the meaning of the word "culture" is quite narrow. Many people associate it simply with the concert hall, the art gallery, or poetry. However, the

term has a broader meaning as well. Culture is the world created by human beings, which emerges on the one hand through human perception, the imaginative ordering of reality, and the attribution of meaning (language), and through the transformation of the environment (technology), on the other.¹ This also includes the organization of society and the state.

Against this background, it is understandable why Richard Niebuhr's enormously influential work *Christ and Culture* was subjected to so much criticism by later theologians. Surveying the history of the church, Niebuhr identifies five typical modes of relating "Christ" and "culture."² Yet in order to do so, he must tacitly assume that there exists a pure, culture-free "Christ," as well as a pure, religionless culture. As Anglican theologian Kathryn Tanner and earlier critics of Niebuhr have pointed out, this is an artificial separation.³ Even divine revelation would not reach us by bypassing culture. "We could not even read Paul's words without the wisdom of the world which enables us to understand ancient texts," Tillich notes in one of his sermons.⁴ Religion itself makes use of the materials of a given culture—its narratives, symbols, and lived experiences—and transforms it into religious culture.

"Asked what the proof is for the fall of the world," Tillich writes, "I like to answer: religion itself, namely, a religious culture beside a secular culture, a temple beside a town hall, a Lord's Supper beside a daily supper, prayer beside work, meditation beside research, *caritas* beside *eros*."⁵ Yet the purpose of religious practice is not to separate the sacred from the secular. We do not set aside particular times for prayer in order to detach prayer from our other activities. Quite the contrary, we do so to extend the prayerful orientation to the whole of life: to learn to pray without ceasing, to open ourselves to the divine presence. Religion is more than a system of rituals, symbols, and emotions; it is the state of being grasped by God, or in Tillich's famous phrase, ultimate concern.⁶ Human beings intuitively know that nothing "penultimate" in life can provide ultimate meaning, and that every penultimate reality points toward the meaning-giving ultimate, whose call they experience. In Tillich's theology, self-transcendence characterizes the entire created world: everything points beyond itself toward its creator; in other words, it has a sacramental character. Every thing—though finite—is inexhaustible. Every thing is more, greater, and deeper than what is immediately given. And since only humans are capable of meaning-

¹Paul TILlich: *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, 72–73. *Systematic Theology*, 1–3. vols., University of Chicago Press, 1951–1963. Hereafter ST/1, ST/2, ST/3.

²Richard NIEBUHR: *Christ and Culture*, New York, Harper & Row, 1951.

³See, for example, Kathryn TANNER: *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1997. Hereafter TC.

⁴Paul TILlich: *The New Being*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955, 110.

⁵Paul TILlich: *The Shaking of the Foundations*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953, 49.

⁶See ST/1, 21–25; Paul TILlich: *Dynamics of Faith*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1957, 1–29.

making, they are also capable of experiencing this mysterious manifestation of the sacred. Sacramentality is therefore not a natural phenomenon but a cultural one.⁷

From this follows the striking conclusion that religion is inherently cultural, and culture inherently religious. Religion is the transcendent—or self-transcending—dimension of human meaning-making. Religion gives culture its meaning, horizon, and depth, while culture is the totality of forms in which the fundamental striving of religion is expressed. In Tillich's well-known definition, "religion is the substance of culture, and culture is the form of religion."⁸

In our alienated world, the mutual interpenetration of religion and culture is hindered by two processes. The first is profanization, when culture begins to ignore—or even deny—the sacredness of other people and things, their meaning that points beyond themselves. In such cases, we reduce and objectify the elements of reality, stripping them of the mysterious and inexhaustible depth that arises from their self-transcending, that is, sacramental character. The human brain becomes "nothing more than" a piece of flesh, love is "merely" the product of hormones, "there is nothing wrong" with the child except that she is lazy, and this tree is „good for nothing but" firewood. In this way, culture closes in upon itself and, lacking any ultimate orientation, becomes shallow and empty. We are all drifting toward the secular; we flee from the presence of God, Tillich writes. "Religions are the restraining, balancing power."⁹ The Reformers were right to say that "every day is the Lord's Day, yet in order to say this, there must have been a Lord's Day and that not only once upon a time but continuously in counterbalance the overwhelming weight of the secular."¹⁰ Paradoxically, this need then gives rise to a distinct sphere of religious culture, which develops its own rituals and institutions and then claims for them a privileged role in mediating the sacred. Tillich calls this process—the appropriation of the sacred—demonization. Whereas profanization obscures and erases the sacred, demonization sharpens the separation between the secular and the sacred.¹¹

When the secular absorbs the religious, autonomous culture emerges. When demonization becomes dominant—that is, when the religious absorbs the secular—culture becomes heteronomous. In autonomous culture, human beings as rational creatures are in the center as the source and measure of culture and religion, car-

⁷For this reason, TILlich criticizes natural religions and philosophies that posit natural power as entirely immanent, with human consciousness as a kind of degeneration. On the contrary, the power of nature as such, Tillich claims, is silent and meaningless; it has no transcendent reference that would endow it with meaning.

⁸ST/3, 112–113, 278–280; TC, 42.

⁹Mackenzie D. BROWN: *Ultimate Concern – Tillich in Dialogue*, New York, Harper & Row, 1965, 166. Religion Online by Harry W. and Grace C. ADAMS. <https://media.sabda.org/alkitab-2/Religion-Online.org/%20Books/Brown/%2C/%20D./%20Mackenzie/%20-%20Ultimate/%20Concern/%20-%20Tillich/%20in/%20Dialogue.pdf>

¹⁰"The Significance of the History of Religions for the Systematic Theologian (1966)", in Werner Christian DANZ, Werner SCHÜßLER és Erdmann STURM (eds.), *Ausgewählte Texte*, Berlin / New York, Walter de Gruyter, 2008, 458. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110211740.455>

¹¹ST/3, 104–110.

rying out their creative activity without ultimate reference. Heteronomous culture, by contrast, subjects human thought and action to the authority of the church or of political pseudo-religions. Opposed to both, in theonomy, as Tillich understands it, religion and culture interpenetrate rather than compete with one another.¹²

Theonomy, as Tillich uses the term, is the state of culture in which the triune God is manifest in all created things, when being grasped by God permeates every human activity. Its foundation is the Christ-event: the manifestation of the eternal Logos in a concrete personal life, and indeed his descent into the very depth of that life, even into complete God-forsakenness. In the historical reality of the incarnation, the primordial unity of God and humanity is restored; and the new life brought about by the resurrection and the Holy Spirit anticipates the full realization of this unity. Theonomy is therefore an eschatological reality, which can only be realized fragmentarily in temporal life, through the work of the Spirit. Yet believers anticipate the harmonious intersection of the sacred and the secular from the eschatological perspective of fulfilment and find their bearings in culture guided by this theonomous vision.

Let us consider what this so-called theonomous intersection means—my own term, based on Tillich—through a concrete example: healing. According to the theonomous view, the divine dimension and the created dimensions are not arranged in a hierarchy of levels separate from one another; rather, they mutually penetrate one another in such a way that the more comprehensive dimension includes, but does not abolish, the less comprehensive one. Healing is a multidimensional reality, since even a headache has biological, psychological, and spiritual dimensions—not to mention depression or other more complex illnesses. Only in a secularized culture are divine healing and medical healing, salvation and biological recovery split apart. In such a context, dualistic thinking dominates: it is either God or medication which heals. Either the soul is healed, or the body. In a theonomous context, by contrast, the divine saving power is manifest in every instance of healing; and conversely, salvation is itself healing, in which both body and soul participate. The growing cooperation in the Western world between physicians, mental health professionals, and pastors may be regarded as a theonomous tendency—and Tillich already welcomed it in the middle of the last century.

This cooperation is a positive manifestation of what is often called twenty-first-century postsecularism. Charles Taylor, the Canadian philosopher and one of the foremost contemporary interpreters of secularization, wrote as early as 2007 that expectations resembling Tillichian theonomy were emerging within our culture: “Knowledge, morality, art, government and the economy should become religious, but freely and from inside, not by compulsion from outside.”¹³ Since Taylor wrote these words, however, culture-war-driven and heteronomous tendencies have un-

¹²For the explanation of the three concepts and a brief account of their historical dialectic, see ST/1, 99–103.

¹³Here TAYLOR is quoting Nikolai Berdyaev. Charles TAYLOR: *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA and London, Harvard University Press, 2007, 535. <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674044289>

fortunately gained strength even in the Western world. We are witnessing the flourishing of autocratic political systems that exploit both the institutional church and Christian nationalism¹⁴ and certain theological conceptions even demand the subordination of modern society and the state to biblical law.

Heteronomous ambitions are always idolatrous; in Tillich's sense, they are demonic. To absolutize one's own religion and impose it upon the wider culture is itself a form of idolatry. It is important to note that, as a Protestant, Tillich is far more critical of heteronomy—that is, toward the church's domination over the world—than of autonomy. He associates the world's coming of age with the Reformation and evaluates this development positively, calling it the “emancipation of the secular.” This emancipation, he writes, was necessary for the recognition that “the Spirit is not bound to the churches”—so much so that the Spirit may even be manifest in groups openly hostile to them.¹⁵

Tillich's insights on theonomy call the community of the church to humility and to what was, from the beginning, a central insight of the Reformation: not to absolutize its own institution or its own identity. The treasury of Christianity's rich spiritual heritage can be opened only when the church and the believer relinquish both the longing for heteronomy and the anxious policing of boundaries, and instead initiate constructive and generous conversations within society, free of the impulses of culture war. Christians should “pray without ceasing”: that is, they should be present in the world with openness to the sacred, with deep, vigilant, and reverent attention. They should attend to what is more, greater, and deeper than what is immediately given, regardless of whether it appears “religious” or not. Paul Tillich's fragmentary and anticipated theonomy can become visible only through such gentle presence.

¹⁴See Péter BUDA, “Fundamentalizmus és politika: a politika szakralizációja és a szakrális instrumentalizációja,” in Tibor FABINY and Orsolya HORVÁTH (eds.), *Fundamentalizmus, protestantizmus, modernitás*, L'Harmattan Kiadó – Hermeneutikai Kutatóközpont, 2024, 167–183.

¹⁵ST/3, 276–280. Parallel to this insight is Tillich's helpful theological approach to modern and contemporary art, namely, that radical doubt, when held with ultimate seriousness, is itself a form of faith (orientation toward God). *The Protestant Era*, 14–15; *Dynamics of Faith*, 16–22; ST, 248, 539. See also ANSELM, GRÜN, Tomáš HALÍK, and Winfried NONHOFF: *Gott los werden? Glaube und Unglaube im Gespräch*, Freiburg im Breisgau, Herder, 2016. (Translation of the title: *Becoming free of God? Faith and unbelief in dialogue*.)