

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: Introduction	3
Chapter Two: The Importance of Dialogue	6
Section I: The Theology of Paul Tillich	15
Chapter Three: The Nature of God	15
Chapter Four: The Human Predicament	34
Chapter Five: Jesus as the <i>New Being</i>	41
Section II: A Buddhist – Christian Tillichian Dialogue	45
Chapter Six: A Brief Summary of Buddhism	45
Chapter Seven: <i>Dukkha</i> and the Human Predicament	54
Chapter Eight: <i>Nirvana</i> and the Ground of Being	57
Chapter Nine: The Buddha and the Christ	70
Chapter Ten: Next Steps	76
Acknowledgements	79
Bibliography	80

To Alison and Ella, thank you for indulging me.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

The traditional Christian view of God as a supranatural<sup>1</sup> deity creating the universe and man *ex nihilo* often has a difficult time finding common ground for a theological discussion on the nature of human suffering and the path to human salvation with the non-dualistic and non-theistic tradition of Buddhism.<sup>2</sup> In his attempt to make Christianity work for the modern mind that lives in a secular world of science and technology<sup>3</sup> and in proximity to various competing religions, Paul Tillich restates Christian theology in terms and concepts that allow for a more fruitful dialogue with Buddhism. This new dialogue can take place on a deeper level than was previously possible due to Tillich's methodology of beginning with the question of "what is our ultimate concern?" and then basing his answer and theology on a partial non-dualistic ontology: God as the ground of being.

Christian differences with Buddhism are most stark in the Buddhist<sup>4</sup> soteriology: the path to *Nirvāna*,<sup>5</sup> the end of human suffering, which lies not in

---

<sup>1</sup> In his *Systematic Theology*, Paul Tillich uses the term "supranatural" versus the more common "supernatural," a convention I have adopted in this book as well.

<sup>2</sup> The one area of commonality more apparent between the two traditions is the parallel between Christian mysticism and Buddhist meditation which I touch on in my final chapter.

<sup>3</sup> H. Thomas, 58. In these footnotes, I use abbreviated citations. For the complete list of the sources, see the Bibliography.

<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this essay, my generic references to Buddhism will refer to Theravāda, the early Buddhist tradition based on the Pali Canon, unless I specifically reference another tradition such as Mahāyāna or Zen.

<sup>5</sup> Because the words *Nirvana*, *karma*, and *dharma* are common place within the English language, I use these Sanskrit forms of the words, instead of their Pali equivalents (*Nibbāna*, *kamma*, and *dhamma*). For other specialized terms when discussing Buddhism, I will use the Pali expressions unless otherwise specified. Definitions of these Pali expressions can be found at the Pali Text Society, online (see Bibliography).

the intervention of a supranatural being on our behalf, nor on an intellectual acquiescence to certain beliefs or doctrine, but in awakening to the reality that the self (and the world around us) is finite and conditioned and that our desires and cravings for permanence in a world of flux and finitude cause our sufferings (*dukkha*). In Buddhism, the duality between human existence and *Nirvana* is transcended by viewing all of reality as changing and impermanent, in which no fixed essence or reality to either ourselves or the universe exists. Faith (*saddha*) in Buddhism derives from a trust, a confidence, in the life of the Buddha and his teachings, because the Buddha was a man named Siddhartha who lived in history and was subject to suffering, yet he overcame suffering through enlightenment, a true understanding of his own true nature and the nature of the world. In other words, the Buddhist soteriological path was embodied in a real person who lived in history and whose life and teachings continue to inspire his adherents today.

In Tillich's ontological description of the human condition we can hear an echo of Buddhism's *dukkha*: our anxiety derives from our consciousness of our own finitude – we are by nature mortal creatures. This anxiety is compounded by our estrangement (the Fall/sin) from the true ground of who we really are – our essential natures. God for Tillich is not a supranatural being who created the world as a potter might create a pot or who tinkers within the creation as a chess master might move chess pieces in an elaborate game, but rather God is being itself – “the ground of being.” Our salvation comes through our reconciliation with this ground of our very being – the experience of union of our actual existence with the dynamic creativity of being itself. This soteriological path is possible due to the existence of a New Being in history: a man who existed, as we do and as Siddhartha did, but in whom there was no estrangement between essence and existence, one in whom individual being and ground of being were truly united: Jesus, the Christ.

This book will explore Tillich's theory as it pertains to the Christian doctrines of the nature of God, the human predicament, and the meaning of Jesus as the Christ. In each of these three areas, I will draw on examples from Buddhism with the goal of illustrating the ways in which Tillich's ontological view of Christianity opens up grounds for discussion with this Eastern tradition. Tillich himself anticipated the effects that such a dialogue could have on his theology. After visiting Japan in 1960 in which he explored his own dialogue with Buddhism, Tillich commented that he should begin again his theological work.<sup>6</sup> By stating a systematic theology in ontological terms in which a conversation with Buddhism can take place on a more common ground, Tillich also opens the door (though he himself does not go through this door) to the possibility that Christian practice can be enlightened from its encounter with Buddhism.

---

<sup>6</sup> Stendahl, vii. It is interesting to note that Tillich dedicates his book *Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions* to a Japanese Buddhist, Professor Yasaka Takagi.

## CHAPTER TEN

### NEXT STEPS

In his theology, Paul Tillich uses the language and methodology of philosophy rather than Biblical exegesis. Although his language is still rooted in his Western perspective with a primacy on “being” as opposed to the East’s primacy of “non-being,” he opens up the door to a more productive dialogue with Buddhism because God is no longer “a being” but is “being itself.” This ontological structure along with his systematic argument that begins with the question of ultimate concern creates a common ground for dialogue. The Tillichian view of God as ground of being works for the modern mind because it allows for a universe in which the physical laws of science function without the arbitrary interference from a supranatural being acting capriciously on the world.

For some, this view of God may seem too distant: why pray to a God who cannot intervene on our behalf? Does it matter whether we are theistic or atheistic if God cannot act on the world? Tillich would see these questions as misguided. Although he views mystical experience as being a limited but important part of the religious life, he does embrace Otto’s experiential view of God as *mysterium tremendum*. Tillich interprets the *mysterium tremendum* as the divine mystery or abyss that we can experience in the ground of our being, but which is “so mysterious that no revelation can exhaust it.”<sup>301</sup> Tillich’s reliance on Otto and the meaning of the holy is perhaps the strongest response

---

<sup>301</sup> Newport, 83.

to the critics who accuse Tillich of being an atheist for his rejection of classical views of God.<sup>302</sup>

A further Christian-Buddhist dialogue in light of Tillich's theology might contribute an additional element of spirituality that is underemphasized in Tillich. While Tillich is sympathetic to the history of Christian mysticism, he does not adequately take into account the unitive nature of many of these experiences in which the self, while not seen as illusory in a Buddhist sense, is transcended into a unitive experience with God.<sup>303</sup>

Although the Buddhist soteriological path, which includes guidelines for moral behavior and specific meditative practices, would run afoul of Tillich's Lutheran sensibilities if taken too explicitly, Tillich does believe that grace implies an element of human acceptance.<sup>304</sup> For us to accept the grace that is already present, however, implies that we are both aware of this grace and that our minds and our hearts are open to receiving this grace. An interesting further study (beyond the scope of this book) would be to examine the ways in which Buddhist meditative techniques when combined with a Tillichian Christian theology may provide a way toward this opening. This suggestion is not new: Christian spiritual and mystical practice has ancient roots, and parallels have been drawn between the Christian mystical practices of Meister Eckhart, the instructions for prayer outlined in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and Buddhist meditative techniques.<sup>305</sup> Some modern day Christians have already tread down this path. Thomas Merton (1915-68) and Hugo M. Enomiya-Lassalle (1898-1990), for example, "dared to immerse themselves in Buddhist spirituality and meditation training [and therefore] prepared the ground for a growing theological interest in exploring the corresponding Buddhist wisdom."<sup>306</sup>

---

<sup>302</sup> H. Thomas, 63.

<sup>303</sup> Olson (1987), 189-190.

<sup>304</sup> Id., 189.

<sup>305</sup> Loy, 59 (footnote 24).

<sup>306</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, 13.

What Tillich's theology can bring to the table is a theological explanation for the benefits of meditation in a Christian context. Just as the Buddhist can use meditation techniques to move beyond faulty views of the self in order to see that the world is changing and impermanent, Christian meditation could be used to move past the human anxiety of finitude by truly understanding that we participate in being itself. Tillich himself writes of the main benefit of mysticism as its direct and "immediate participation in the divine Ground by elevation into unity with it, transcending all finite realities."<sup>307</sup>

Rather than viewing prayer as a method of asking from God for those things we want (which is often a psychological mask for seeking control in a world in which our actual control is limited), adopting meditative techniques into the regular Christian practice may help the modern Christian to find meaning behind the physical laws that govern the universe, laws that include randomness, chaos, and freewill and that often lead to unpleasant consequences. By stripping away our faulty views of ourselves and the world around us, we can come to experience God in a new way – we can open our eyes to grace by peeling back the onion layers of the changing, finite world and our own egos to reveal the infinite and eternal ground that underlies the universe and ourselves. To the Buddhist, this stripping away may reveal an unconditioned emptiness, experienced as a universal bliss; to the Christian we may find the ecstatic experience of the eternal divine.

In conclusion, Tillich himself calls for a continued dialogue with the East with the purpose not of conversion, nor as a philosophical attempt at unifying the religions, but a dialogue in which "Christianity will be a bearer of the religious answer as long as it breaks through its own particularity."<sup>308</sup>

---

<sup>307</sup> Tillich (1994), 58.

<sup>308</sup> Id., 61.



### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is the result of my research and writing at Oxford University during 2008 and 2009 at Oriel College where I was reading for a Masters in the Study of Religions. The book would not have been possible without the guidance of my dedicated tutors: Sondra Hausner, Peggy Morgan, and Johannes Zachhuber. My deepest gratitude goes to my patient and understanding family, my wife Alison and my daughter Gabriella, who braved a move to a new country while I pursued a dream. I would also like to thank my parents, Jeffrey and Eileen, for their support and unending confidence in me.

Finally, I am indebted to the late Paul Tillich, whose work is the subject of this book and whose theology has allowed me to remain a Christian in this world of technology, reason, science, and a plurality of faiths. If Christianity is to flourish in the Twenty-First Century, then it is time that we begin again to discuss Tillich's ideas.