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Reconcilierea dintre sacru și profan în viziunea lui Paul Tillich

The Reconciliation between the Sacred and the Profane in Paul Tillich's Vision

Abstract: The philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich's writings were concerned with the connection between Christianity and secular culture. Thus, the human person is a religious being, people's activity has a religious significance, religion is actually identified with their spiritual life, and people's spiritual concerns have a religious importance. But paradoxically, religion has found itself in the strange situation of being confined to its own specific realm, different from the secular one. But this weird split between the sacred and the profane will be removed in the future that the *Book of Revelation* tells us about. Tillich highlights the idea that the rupture between the sacred and the profane is neither possible nor acceptable from a biblical point of view, the two realms being in a relationship of harmonious interpenetration, and not of juxtaposition or opposition. Any attempt to separate the secular from the sacred realm is the consequence and salient proof of the deplorable situation in which the fallen man finds himself. This state of division and conflict that we are currently witnessing is completely unnatural, as he further argues: Paul Tillich disassociates himself equally from the extremist positions of secularism and ecclesiastic imperialism. Just as he is not a supporter of the divorce between the divine and the mundane, Paul Tillich also tries to find the coordinates of a just relationship between religion and culture.

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What is the connection between Christianity and secular culture? At the beginning of one of his books, Paul Tillich introduces us to *Religion as a Dimension in Man's Spiritual Life*. He states that man's

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cultural activity has a religious dimension, but, in his words, it does not mean that man's cultural initiatives should be under ecclesiastic control. Man in his view is a *homo religiosus*, as the German-American theologian and philosopher opines that the human being's spirit can only be religious: "religion is an aspect of the human spirit"². But what he states next seems even more important: "Religion is not a special function of man's spiritual life, but it is the dimension of depth in all of its functions. [...] Religion is the aspect of depth in the totality of the human spirit."³

Tillich says that religion somehow is identified to man's (spiritual) life itself. Tillich expresses himself poetically and that is why sometimes he is less clear, but it can easily be seen from his explanations that the terms *religion* and *depth* are closely connected: *depth* "means that the religious aspect points to that which is ultimate, infinite, unconditional in man's spiritual life."⁴ In short, to Paul Tillich *religion* is nothing else but the "ultimate concern."⁵

This *ultimate concern* is present in all the spheres of man's spiritual life, viz. the moral, the cognitive and the aesthetic ones. Religion cannot be uprooted from the human being's soul, and so spiritual life is in fact religious life: "Religion is the substance, the ground, and the depth of man's spiritual life. This is the religious aspect of the human spirit."⁶ *Religion* has ended up in the (unnatural) position of being confined to a realm of its own, different from the *secular* one, "because of the tragic estrangement of man's spiritual life from its own ground and depth."⁷ But this abnormal scission between *secular* and *religious* is to be deleted in an eschatological perspective, in the *future* he talks about, especially in the *Book of Revelation*, when *God will be all in all*, continues Paul Tillich. In the *heavenly Jerusalem* there will not be a *secular* realm, as there will not be a *religious* realm either. At that time, religion will

² Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, Oxford University Press, 1959, pp. 4-5.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

become (again) what it is truly supposed to be, viz. “the all-determining ground and substance of man’s spiritual life.”⁸

Paul Tillich’s plea in favour of *reconciling the sacred and the profane* is commendable. Religion is the very essence of man’s spiritual life, and through religion man escapes the mundane, common and ordinary, being able to experiment the Holy – “the ultimate ground of being”⁹ -, thus acceding to something above the mundane, common, and ordinary, to something that is *untouchable, awe-inspiring, glorious, and ultimate*¹⁰. The terms *ultimate, Unconditioned/unconditional* are associated to the idea of *transcending*, and the excerpt below, taken from *The Two Types of Philosophy of Religion*, constitutes clear proof of Paul Tillich’s penchant towards *philosophy* and *apophatic spirituality*:

Neither “The Unconditioned” nor “something unconditional” is meant as a being, not even the highest being, not even God. God is unconditioned, that makes him God; but the “unconditional” is not God. The word “God” is filled with the concrete symbols in which mankind has expressed its ultimate concern – its being grasped by something unconditional. And this “something” is not just a thing, but the power of being in which every being participates.¹¹

In *Aspects of a Religious Analysis of Culture*¹², Tillich resumes, from a slightly different angle, the issues previously discussed, also analysing the relation between religion and culture. It is true that he proposes a (*Christian*) *religious analysis of culture*, and that is why he first tackles religion, and only then culture. But theologically speaking, any investigation of culture can only be religious, which is also his approach. It can only be a religious one as man is not only an irremediably religious being, but a religious being *par excellence*, because the content of man’s *ultimate* and *unconditional* concern is God, “who is manifest in Jesus the Christ”, the “true God”¹³.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 40-51.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

Tillich resumes the idea according to which the *definite separation/ the rupture* between the *sacred* and the *profane* is neither *possible*, nor *acceptable* from a Biblical point of view: the entire Christian spirituality evinces this very aspect. The rupture is not possible from a double perspective: on the one hand, man is religious, and the universe is created. “The universe is God’s sanctuary.”¹⁴ The entire world is providential God’s sanctuary: this premise would lead to the fact that the *sacred* and the *secular* and implicitly, *religion* and *culture* cannot be arbitrarily separated, the two realms being in a relation of harmonious *interweaving* and not juxtaposition or opposition¹⁵. Any attempt at “emancipating”/separating the *secular* from the *sacred* domain constitutes the consequence and clear proof of the deplorable position of the fallen man, according to Paul Tillich¹⁶. This state of *division* and *conflict* we are currently witnessing is completely unnatural, in his opinion: Paul Tillich dissociates himself to an equal extent from the extremist positions of *secularism* and of *ecclesiastic imperialism*, as is apparent from the following relevant text:

This does not mean that [...] the religious should be swallowed by the *secular*, as *secularism* desires, nor that the *secular* should be swallowed by the *religious*, as *ecclesiastic imperialism* desires.¹⁷

Just like he is not the adept of the divorce between the *divine* and the *mundane*, Paul Tillich tries to find the coordinates of a rightful relation between *religion* and *culture*, without falling in the trap of the *dualist* vision. It may be right, if we really want to know the kind of connection between culture and religion, to try and clarify first the proximity between *culture* and *cult*. To Paul Tillich religion is the *substance* of culture, and the latter is the *form* of the former. This clarification is of utmost importance. As a result, the relation between

¹⁴ Werner Schüßler, “Paul Tillich – Interpreter of Life. The Importance of His Philosophico-Theological Thinking Today”, *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion*, 74:2 (2020), pp. 105-121. Paul Tillich, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

¹⁵ Paul Tillich, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

religion and *culture* is the same as the one between *content* and *form*:

Religion as ultimate concern is the meaning-given substance of culture, and culture is the totality of forms in which the basic concern of religion expresses itself. In abbreviation: religion is the substance of culture, culture is the form of religion.¹⁸

According to Tillich, the deepest religious concerns and solicitudes are cultural in nature, as religion speaks the language of culture, language is a cultural creation, there is no sacred language, religious language is an ordinary one, and all these hold true for the *artistic style* as well. But if the language spoken by man is a *cultural* product, it should be highlighted that *religion* is the one speaking it, or in other words, any cultural creation is the expression of this *ultimate concern*. If religion is the substance of culture, then the *theology of culture* is not an academic subject among others, but instead it is the only one able to reveal the true nature of culture. The final message of the *theology of culture*, if it is accepted that there is one, might be the following: "The Church and culture are within, not alongside, each other. And the Kingdom of God includes both while transcending both."¹⁹

Paul Tillich is the proponent of the *synthesis* between the *holy* and the *profane* by means of which the opposition between the two realities is overcome. He passes from accepting the distinct realities to the correlation existing between them, divinity and the world, religion and culture, the Church and the culture, all these are by no means separated, or in irreconcillable relations, and the same is valid about theology and the philosophy of religion. In his well-known work *The Interpretation of History*²⁰ he systematically elaborates on the relation between the *holy* and the *profane*.

In fact, his constant attempt aims at providing an accurate perspective on religion, one devoid of fundamentalist accents, able to reveal its interaction with the daily life of the human being. In *What*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

²⁰ Paul Tillich, *The Interpretation of History*, translated by N. A. Rasetzky and Elsa L. Talmey, New York-London, Charles Scribner's Sons Ltd, 1936, pp. 221ff.

is *Religion*?²¹, he suggests that any concrete human activity, if regarded from a specific angle, that of faith, allows for an interpretation devoid of any conventionalism, apt to reveal the genuine identity of the human being and the meaning of the cult-oriented approaches.

Paul Tillich notices that a certain type of human experience reflects upon the manner in which the relation between the sacred and the profane may be conceived. More directly, the relation between the *sacred* and the *profane* is determined to a great extent by the accurate comprehension of the divine attributes:

Whenever omnipresence is experienced, it breaks down the difference between the sacred and the profane. The sacramental presence of God is a consequence of His omnipresence. It is an actual manifestation of His omnipresence, dependent of course on the history of revelation and the concrete symbols which have been created by it. His sacramental presence is not the appearance of somebody who is ordinarily absent and occasionally comes. If one always experienced the divine presence, there would be no difference between sacred and secular places. The difference does not exist in the divine life.²²

Paul Tillich discusses a different issue, viz. the connection existing between the *history of salvation* and *universal history*, the former being a component of the latter. This sacred history may be delineated in space and time, it may be analysed by taking into account the connection among the events pertaining to different historic periods:

As an object of secular historiography, it must be subjected to the tests prescribed by a strict application of the methods of historical research. Simultaneously, however, although it is within history, it manifests something which is not from history. For this reason the history of salvation has also been called sacred history. It is sacred and secular in the same series of events. In it history shows its self-transcending character, its striving toward ultimate fulfilment. There is no reason to call the history of salvation "suprahistorical".²³

²¹ Paul Tillich, *What is Religion?* James Luther Adams (Ed.), New York, Harper and Row, 1969, pp. 81ff

²² Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, Chicago, IL; The University of Chicago Press, 1951, p. 278.

²³ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. III, Chicago, IL, The University of Chicago Press, 1963, p. 363.

Any (artificial) separation occurring between the *sacred* and the *profane* is in fact a fateful detachment from everything durable. This *detachment* specific to our time is the effect of eroding a subjectivity that used to be more prone to being subjected to certain metaphysical imperatives and implicitly to observing traditional moral duties. *Sacrality* was evacuated from the public to the private space, and the most important consequence turned out to be the debasement of human life. In this respect Paul Tillich's philosophy is a warning against the metaphysical and ethical error committed by those isolating realities meant to be closely connected.

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