

MICHAEL F. PALMER
PAUL TILLICH'S PHILOSOPHY OF ART



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BY
MICHAEL F. PALMER

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*To the memory
of my father*

PREFACE

In this book I have attempted to reconstruct Paul Tillich's Philosophy of Art, and inevitably the result is sometimes not so much what Tillich said as what I think he would have said. Thankfully, however, Tillich's work is not of the kind that makes such an undertaking altogether fanciful. It is true that he left us no major work on the subject; but what he did leave is a series of articles and lectures, spanning over forty years, which are remarkable in their consistency of argument and content. This, coupled with the 'systematic' and interlocking character of Tillich's thinking in general, makes it possible to fit the separate pieces of the jig-saw together.

One further point should be made. Tillich's central preoccupation was with the relation between religion and culture, and thus with the construction of a theology which would overcome the 'destructive division' between the sacred and secular realms. The result is his famous 'theology of culture', which many commentators maintain is his greatest and most enduring intellectual achievement. And within this theology, art occupies a preeminent position. For, according to Tillich, it is in art that the convergence of these two realms may be observed. Thus he requires us to contemplate the work of painters, novelists and sculptors. We can learn, he says, more about culture and religion by studying the paintings of a Picasso or Munch than we can by reading the textbooks of theologians and sociologists. Art, therefore, does not stand on the fringes of Tillich's interest; rather, it is that activity which, more than any other, both explains and exemplifies the theology of culture itself.

My debts are many, but in particular I should like to express my thanks to Professor John Heywood Thomas of Nottingham University, who first introduced me to Tillich's work and supervised my early research, and to Professor Carl Heinz Ratschow of Marburg University, who was untiring in his advice and encouragement in the preparation

of this book. I am also conscious of how much I owe to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, under whose auspices this work was written.

Westerkirk 1983

Michael Palmer

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- : 'Recent Protestant Theology', *Theological Studies* (1953), pp. 573–585.

ABBREVIATIONS FOR THE WORKS
OF PAUL TILLICH

- CTB *The Courage To Be* (London: Collins, 1962)
DF *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958)
GW *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Renate Albrecht (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk)
IH *The Interpretation of History*, trans. N. Rasetzki and E. Talmey (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936)
OB *On the Boundary*, with an Introduction by J. Heywood Thomas (London: Collins, 1967). This is a revision, newly translated of Part I of *IH*
PE *The Protestant Era*, trans. J. Luther Adams (abridged ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957)
RS *The Religious Situation*, trans. H. Richard Niebuhr (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books, 1967)
ST *Systematic Theology* (London: James Nisbet. Vol. I, 1953; Vol. II, 1957; Vol. III, 1964)
WR *What is Religion?* trans. and ed. J. Luther Adams (New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row, 1969)

CHAPTER ONE
EXPRESSIONISM AND THE
CATEGORY OF EXPRESSIVENESS
I. RELIGIOUS ART AND EXPRESSIONISM

In his short autobiographical sketch *On the Boundary* Paul Tillich writes:

Art is the highest form of play and the genuinely creative realm of the imagination. Though I have not produced anything in the field of the creative arts, my love for the arts has been of great importance to my theological and philosophical work.¹

In tracing the development of this love, Tillich tells us that his father, a superintendent of the Prussian Territorial Church, although caring little for architecture and the visual arts, was a keen musician and even composed a little, thereby maintaining 'the musical traditions associated with the evangelical ministry'.² Tillich's interests were to be otherwise.

¹ OB: 26. The notion of art as play, with which Tillich begins, is a recurrent theme in German aesthetics and probably stems from Schiller's use of the term 'play-drive' (*Spieltrieb*) to characterize the artist's voluntary acceptance of rules. A man is 'nur da ganz Mensch, wo er spielt'. *Sämtliche Werke* (Säkular Edition, Stuttgart & Berlin: Cotta, 1905) XII, p. 59. Bernard Bosanquet, in his *A History of Aesthetic* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1922), suggests that Schiller was here dependent on Kant (*Ibid.*, pp. 294—295), although another possible influence is Goethe. Cf. J. Ulrich, 'Goethes Einfluß auf die Entwicklung des Schillerschen Schönheitsbegriffes', *Jahrbuch der Goethe-Gesellschaft* (Weimar: Verlag der Goethe-Gesellschaft, 1934) XX, pp. 165—212; and Elizabeth Bohning, 'Goethe's and Schiller's Interpretation of Beauty', *The German Quarterly*, XXII, No. 4 (November 1949) pp. 185—194. Interestingly, the idea of art as play is central also to Karl Barth's famous essay on 'Mozart' in *Religion and Culture: Essays in Honour of Paul Tillich* (New York: Harper, 1959).

² OB: 26.

For not only was he unmusical—and appears to have remained so until late in life—but at an early age developed a ‘passion’ for architecture, one which expressed itself later in ‘the admiration of and pilgrimage to great architecture, and in the feeling of inner fulfilment in places where good architecture surrounded me’.³ There are, he suggests, environmental reasons for this. Until his fourteenth year, Tillich lived in the parish house of Schönfliess, a small town in eastern Brandenburg, medieval in character and built around an old Gothic church. The close proximity of the house to the church not only had, it appears, an influence on Tillich’s decision to become a theologian but also accounts for his even earlier ambition to become an architect.

In my early life I wished to become an architect and only in my late teens the other desire, to become a philosophical theologian, was victorious. I decided to build in concepts and propositions instead of stone, iron and glass. But building remains my passion, in clay and in thought and as the relation of the medieval cathedrals to the scholastic systems shows, the two ways of building are not so far from each other. Both express an attitude to the meaning of life as a whole.⁴

During this same period, Tillich’s ‘longing for art’ turned also to literature, in particular to the classic Schlegel translations of Shakespeare. Here begins his life-long infatuation with *Hamlet*, a play which he later called ‘this most precious work of secular literature viewed existentially’⁵, and which explains in part his ‘instinctive sympathy today for what is called existentialism’.⁶ Neither Goethe nor Dostoevsky had a similar impact, the former expressing ‘too little of the boundary situation... it did not then seem to be existential enough’.⁷ Later Tillich was to revise this opinion of Goethe, and included him among those other poets—George, Hofmannsthal, Rilke and Werfel—who had moved him deeply and contributed to his own theological development. This interest in poetry, he admits, was largely due to the influence of

³ ‘Honesty and Consecration’, *Protestant Church Buildings and Equipment* (New York) XIII, No. 3 (September 1965) p. 15.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Quoted by James Luther Adams, *Paul Tillich’s Philosophy of Culture, Science and Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) p. 66.

⁶ *OB*: 27. Other references to *Hamlet* are in *CTB*: 46, 66, and *ST*, 3; 345.

⁷ *Ibid.*