

## Short Articles

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### Critique and Formation

#### Paul Tillich's Interpretation of Protestantism

**Abstract:** The article examines the development of Paul Tillich's understanding of Protestantism. Beginning with his 1913 'Systematic Theology', the shifts in his theory of Protestantism, first developed after the First World War and then at the end of the 1920s, are reconstructed. It is demonstrated that, from the outset, Tillich extended the traditional soteriological interpretation of Protestantism into a universal-cosmological theory. Protestantism means not only critique, but also formation.

In the 1929 published article *Protestantism as a Critical and Formative Principle*, Paul Tillich's theory of Protestantism assumed its final form. The article contains the inclusion as well as the critique of the Protestantism that had emerged from Luther's Reformation. According to Tillich's critique, the soteriological interpretation of religion, provided by the Wittenberg theologian in his doctrine of justification, needs to be replaced by a universal, cosmological framework. The critical negativity of Protestantism needs to be joined with its realization. Protestantism is not only critique. It is also formation. This conviction is the result of Tillich's theological development in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which proceeds from the theological principle (by means of which he was able to unite his interpretation of Protestantism in the texts before and shortly after the First World War) to the Protestant principle.

Three stages can be discerned in the development of Tillich's understanding of Protestantism. First, the construction of a theological principle of the Systematic Theology from 1913, then the interpretation of Protestantism after the First World War, and finally the formulation of Protestantism as critique and formation at the end of the 1920s. These stages of development supply the structure that informs the following considerations.

# 1 The Theological Principle and Protestantism

Tillich had already criticized the traditional framework of the doctrine of justification in the speculative construction of the Systematic Theology from 1913. Here the fundamental determination of religion is justification, which, as the author emphasizes, is nevertheless “broader than the usual formulation, which contents itself with the equation justification = forgiveness of sins” (EW IX, 320)<sup>1</sup>. According to Tillich, against the soteriological interpretation of Albrecht Ritschl and Pietism, it is necessary to refer justification to the “whole state of the world” (ibid.). This notion should be understood to mean that God is not only to be found in his revelation in Christ, but also in the world.

In the system concept from 1913, which cannot be discussed in detail here, Tillich defines religion by means of the concept of paradox, the return of the relative to the absolute. This paradox is the standpoint of theology, or the theological principle.<sup>2</sup> It mediates the absolute with the relative point of view. Tillich’s interpretation of Protestantism is condensed, without of course using the term itself, in the theological principle. The theological principle – the synthesis of the relative and the absolute – is structured in three moments: an absolute, a relative and a third moment.<sup>3</sup> The third moment addresses the realization of the theological principle in history. Decisive for the system concept from 1913 is the assignment of the absolute moment of the theological principle to justification and the relative moment to christology.<sup>4</sup> Justification, designated as the material principle, constitutes the superordinate aspect as opposed to christology, which is interpreted as the formal principle.

Statements about the Reformation in the Text from 1913 are sparse. Nevertheless, essential features of Tillich’s image of the Reformation can be extrapolated, which remain relatively constant in his subsequent work. In the 26<sup>th</sup> paragraph of the apologetic – which bears the heading *The Historical Establishment of the*

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1 I use the following abbreviations: EW = Ergänzungs- und Nachlassbände zu den Gesammelten Werken von Paul Tillich, ed. by Ingeborg C. Henel et al., until today 20 vols., Stuttgart, later Berlin 1971seqq.; GW = Paul Tillich, Gesammelte Werke, ed. Renate Albrecht, 14 vols., Stuttgart 1959seqq.

2 Cf. EW IX, 317: „Der Standpunkt der Theologie ist die Einheit von Glauben und Wissen, Konkretem und Abstraktem in der Synthesis des Paradox.“

3 Cf. ibid.

4 Cf. EW IX, 318–325. Cf. F. Wittekind, „Allein durch Glauben.“ Tillichs sinntheoretische Umformulierung des Rechtfertigungsverständnisses, in: C. Danz/W. Schüßler (Ed.), Religion – Kultur – Gesellschaft. Der frühe Tillich im Spiegel neuer Texte (1919–1920), Wien 2008, 39–65, here 46.

*Christological Judgment* (EW IX, 323) – the author refers to the history of Christianity.<sup>5</sup> In this context, a few observations are made concerning the Reformation. The statement is made: “Yet the forces of the theological principle, preserved in Scripture, reacted in the Reformation against the bondage to certain cultural moments” (EW IX, 325). The Reformation is interpreted here as the ascertainment of the absolute moment of the theological principle, which indeed entered into history with Christ, but was concealed by Catholicism.<sup>6</sup> In Luther’s reformation the theological principle breaks through, with reference to its absolute moment. However, it is constricted soteriologically by the theologian from Wittenberg. In the subsequent history of Protestantism, the one-sided formulation of the theological principle was condensed in the working out of the scriptural principle as a new “concrete-absolute system” (EW IX, 325), which then shattered under the force of the historical critique. Tillich expressly describes the interpretation of the Reformation and of Protestantism indicated here – which amounts to the demand to frame justification not as a soteriological, but as a universal, cosmological principle – as the “dogmatic-historical justification of the present undertaking” (ibid.), that is, his own system concept.

According to the intention of the Systematic Theology from 1913, Protestantism has to be understood as a universal principle, and it has to be connected to history. This is what the theological principle signifies in its three moments.

## 2 From the Theological Principle to the Protestant Principle, or: Tillich’s Interpretation of the Reformation after the First World War

The theological principle continues to constitute the systematic foundation of Tillich’s writings after the First World War. However, as indicated by the 1919 essay *Justification and Doubt*, it underwent decisive modifications with regard to its pre-war formulation. These modifications essentially consist in the fact that the 1913 system concept’s superordinate frame of the absolute point of view is, so to speak, inserted into the act-structure of the religious performance. In this way,

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. EW IX, 323.

<sup>6</sup> Cf.: „Paulus’ und Luthers Kampf für die Rechtfertigung war ein Kampf gegen die Relativitäten des Reflexionsstandpunktes, der die Religion verderbte und die Erlösung hinderte; beide brachten die absoluten Kategorien im negativen wie positivem Sinne.“ (EW IX, 319)

the concrete and particular, which was already a necessary moment of truth in the system from 1913, no longer comes into view as a mere moment of passage. The concreteness of history now becomes, at the same time, the necessary expression of the truth and the transgression thereof. This is represented in the new guiding concepts of meaning [Sinn], the unconditioned, kairos and theonomy. These concepts describe the reflexive structure of the self-relation in its historical embeddedness and aim at the reflexive transparency of the present situation. The determination of religion in terms of the absolute, as paradox, is replaced by a newly constructed framework that aligns with Husserl's intentional consciousness. Religion is directedness toward the unconditioned. This also leads to a reformulation of the theological principle and its three moments. Taken together in its three moments, it now describes the structure of justification, which is therefore no longer (as was still the case in 1913) merely identified with the absolute moment. The new systematic groundwork of his theology after the First World War is also associated with a critique of concepts of religion formulated in terms of capability. Religion is not predicated on a special function of culture, but on the self-relation of consciousness. Thus, here also, there is an associated critique of the soteriological interpretation of Protestantism.<sup>7</sup> And, once again, it is Ritschl and Pietism who represent this inadequate and false interpretation of the Reformation. Tillich's universal, cosmological formulation of justification interprets it as an act of reflection in the self-relation of consciousness. Religion is – in an abbreviated formulation – the being-disclosed of the unconditioned as the substratum of consciousness in all cultural functions, or, in Tillich's words: intending the unconditioned [Meinen des Unbedingten]. In and through its concrete contents, consciousness orients itself toward the unconditioned, the latter functioning as a description of consciousness, while the concrete contents function as media or symbols. The unconditioned underlies consciousness as such. In religion, the concrete cultural forms that are posited by consciousness are negated, becoming, through the positing and fracturing of forms, symbols through which the unconditioned is intended. Thus, the universal religion, defined in terms of the theology of justification, consists in the passage from cultural consciousness to the intending of the unconditioned. How does Tillich interpret the Reformation according to this (with regard to the system conception from 1913) changed systematic groundwork?

Here as well, the foundational structure of Protestantism as the true religion results from the theological principle and its three moments. In the lecture

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7 „Die Rechtfertigung in ihrer historischen Beschränkung auf das Problem der Heilsgewißheit ist also nicht im Stande, theologisches Princip zu werden.“ (EW X, 143)

course, *Christendom and the Societal Problems of the Present*, Luther's Reformation is understood to be the critical dissolution of the unified religious culture of the Middle Ages.<sup>8</sup> In Luther's Reformation, "critique" (EW XII, 80) breaks through in the history of Christendom. "Luther's basic position is the displacement of institutional and sacramental grace, with its merit-consequence-scheme and its asceticism, by a personal, spiritual grace experienced in the interior of the person as fellowship with God." (EW XII, 98) In the Reformation, the absolute categories are grasped, the absolute moment of the theological principle, by which the unified culture of the middle ages was dissolved. What is missing in the Lutheran Reformation are the relative categories, the connection with history.

In his writings from the beginning of the 1920s Tillich repeatedly took up this interpretation of the Reformation, assigning it to the absolute philosophies of history in his constructions of the philosophy of history.<sup>9</sup> However, owing to their critical negativity, the revolutionary, absolute forms of the interpretation of history lead to a devaluation of history.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Protestantism needs to be connected to history, without abandoning the absolute moment of the theological principle.<sup>11</sup> The religious socialism of the writings from the beginning of the 1920s represent this linking of absolute and relative moments.

To be sure, religious socialism was realized as critique and formation, but the systematic problem with this conception consists in that Tillich cannot make clear in what way religion differs from the general structure of consciousness that underlies both religion and culture. This is precisely what Karl Barth had criticized in his argument with Tillich in the year 1923.

### 3 From the Protestant Principle to Protestantism as Critique and Formation

Tillich reacted to Karl Barth's critique in his lecture, *Justification and Doubt*, published in 1924, introducing the distinction between foundational revelation and salvation revelation. It is only from here that the final interpretation of Protes-

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. EW XII, 72, 80.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. GW II, 82f.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. P. Tillich, *Kairos*, in: *Ausgewählte Texte*, ed. by C. Danz/W. Schüßler/E. Sturm, Berlin/New York 2008, 43–62, here 45–49.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Tillich, *Kairos*, 47.

tantism as critique and formation results. Tillich now also submits a soteriological interpretation of Protestantism to critique and calls for a universal, cosmological formulation. As was already the case in the outline of the same name from 1919, the two keywords, justification and doubt, stand for this systematic intention. However, the interpretation of Luther and the Reformation offered in the lecture from 1924 now has as its focus the classification of Karl Barth's soteriological interpretation of Protestantism within the history of theology. "With Luther the protest was issued against the unconditional, self-positing Catholic realization, which, by virtue of its hierarchical form, increasingly made any effective correction impossible. As a result of this there is in Protestantism a thought-out relationship to realization in general, to religion and to the Catholic principle."<sup>12</sup> Soteriology, as elevated by Luther to the foundational point of view of his reformational new interpretation of religion, anticipates the critical philosophy of Kant, which was presently being renewed by Barth and dialectical theology. Here as well, Tillich understands the Reformation, as he had already done in 1913, as the breakthrough of the absolute categories and of the critique. Yet, this interpretation is now used for the purpose of classifying dialectical theology in the history of theology. As was the case with Luther's soteriological interpretation of Protestantism, so with his modern, dialectical successors, the breakthrough, or corrective, which justification represents (that is, the earlier, absolute moment of the theological principle) is taken to be the whole of religion, thereby negating religion's realization.<sup>13</sup>

Tillich's own interpretation of Protestantism, which, as an answer to Barth, is also aimed at a universal understanding of Protestantism, follows the old formulation according to which, in terms of sense and the philosophy of spirit, the unconditioned is the foundation of all consciousness, and religion is directedness toward the unconditioned. Yet this is now carried out on the basis of the new distinction between foundational revelation and salvific revelation, which have broken asunder in the history of religion.<sup>14</sup> The foundational revelation represents the reflexive disclosedness of consciousness, which is divine as well as de-

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<sup>12</sup> Tillich, *Rechtfertigung und Zweifel*, in: *Ausgewählte Texte*, ed. by C. Danz/W. Schüßler/E. Sturm, Berlin/New York 2008, 124–137, here 126.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Tillich, *Rechtfertigung und Zweifel*, 126: „Eben darum wurde die Überwindung des Gesetzes hier zum ‚Protestantismus‘, d.h. aber zur Verneinung der Realisierung und damit zur grundsätzlichen Verneinung der eigenen Voraussetzung.“

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Tillich, *Rechtfertigung und Zweifel*, 135: „Unterschieden werden können beide erst dann, wenn diese selbstverständliche Einheit aufgelöst ist und das Ganze der Offenbarung überhaupt fraglich geworden.“

monic, or, as the later technical term of the *Systematic Theology* puts it, ambivalent or ambiguous. The knowledge of God is thus not exclusively bound to the revelation in Christ, as it is in Barth. By contrast, Tillich now defines the salvific revelation as the overcoming of the divine-demonic ambiguity of consciousness and no longer as intending the unconditioned.<sup>15</sup> It is only in this way that religion, the reflective formulation of which he maintains and the contents of which are also not determined here, receives a more precise definition than in the earlier writings.

The study published five years later, *Protestantism as a Critical and Formative Principle*, takes up the here outlined universal, cosmological understanding of Protestantism and encapsulates it in the protestant principle, which is also maintained in the later works. The former theological principle, with its three moments, is transferred over to the concept of Protestantism, in that prophetic critique and formation are merged with critique and formation. Over against the Reformation and its modern dialectical successors, who (as already in 1924) are interpreted as a rediscovery of the prophetic tradition – a classification of the Reformation that is also maintained in the later works –, Tillich merges critique with formation. It is only from this that an understanding of Protestantism as reflexive and universal religion results, in which critical negativity and reflexive positing of form are joined together. It is as a form of grace that Protestantism realizes itself as the permanent self-critique of religion and culture. Yet, it is precisely the associated sublation (of the contradiction of the holy and the profane as objective spheres) which itself requires a religious symbolization, if the “form of grace” is meant somehow to be visible as “actual form”<sup>16</sup>. For this reason, there have to be religions within culture as special symbolic forms and social groups. These have the function to point, on the one hand, to the sublation of the contradiction of religion and culture in the eternal, and on the other hand, to the fact that this contradiction cannot be overcome in history. At the end of the 1920s, Protestantism as critique and formation is construed by Tillich as a self-reflective religion. It is alone by virtue of its perpetually imposed self-critique, of all of its cultural and religious settlements, that Protestantism is not only absolute religion, but in it the Reformation is also completed. To be sure, Protestantism had

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Tillich, *Rechtfertigung und Zweifel*, 135: „Um dieser Zweideutigkeit der Grundoffenbarung willen wird die Offenbarung des Göttlichen zur Heilsoffenbarung, zur Überwindung des Dämonischen in der Menschheitsreligion.“

<sup>16</sup> Tillich, *Der Protestantismus als kritisches und gestaltendes Prinzip*, in: *Ausgewählte Texte*, ed. by C. Danz/W. Schüßler/E. Sturm, Berlin/New York 2008, 200–221, here 218.

rediscovered the prophetic tradition, but had given it a one-sided, critical formulation. Only in the understanding of Protestantism as elaborated by Tillich is an adequate consciousness of Protestantism reached, appropriate to modernity, being simultaneously critique and formation.

If, from here, we look back once again at the course of the reflections submitted here, then it is apparent that there is a high degree of continuity in the understanding of the Reformation in Tillich's texts. In terms of content, in the writings consulted, going back to 1913, the descriptions remain to a large degree the same. However, this should not belie the fact that the formulations Tillich employs in the three historical contexts of his works are fitted into different systematic contexts, and yet also receive thereby an altered systematic function.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> I express my thanks to Jason Valdez (Vienna) for translating this paper.