

Ecstasy—a Way to Religious Knowledge —Some Remarks on Paul Tillich as Theologian and Philosopher

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Most of the articles in this volume look at *ecstasy* from the point of view of psychology, history or sociology. With my contribution I wish mainly to stimulate some philosophical reflection on ecstasy. This I shall do by presenting some points in the philosophical and theological thinking of Paul Tillich.¹

In the context of this volume it is possible to argue for a description of Tillich's thought along at least two different lines:

1. He can be looked upon as a religious thinker. In this case he is of interest for *religiology*² mainly as historical material. Then he can be seen as a Christian who in modern time has tried theoretically to reflect upon his own religious faith and the place of ecstasy in that faith.

2. He can also be regarded as a philosopher of religion, who tries to reflect universally and critically upon the phenomena of religion and ecstasy. In that case his main contribution to *religiology* is to help *religiology* to reflect upon the question of what possible meaning the concept of "religious ecstasy" can have in a modern scientific context.

This paper will attempt to cast some light on both sides of Tillich's thinking.

¹ Tillich was born in 1886 in Prussia. His father was a Lutheran priest. He studied theology and philosophy. In 1911 he became doctor of philosophy, in 1912 licentiate of theology, in both cases on a thesis dealing with Friedrich von Schelling. After World War I he was professor both of theology and of philosophy in Germany. When the Nazis seized power in 1933, he had to emigrate to the USA. There he worked mainly at the Union Theological Seminary until his death in 1965 (Tillich 1952, 16, 18f.; Pauck 1976, 205f., 213).

² I use the term "religiology" as an "um-

brellaterm" for all the disciplines of the scientific study of religion (excluding scientific theology), the main disciplines of which are the history, sociology, psychology and phenomenology of religion. Consequently, "religiology" corresponds to the German word "Religionswissenschaft". I feel it necessary to precise my terminology at this point, because there does not seem to be any generally accepted "umbrellaterm" in English (Pummer 1972, 102ff.). My use of "religiology" here has a slightly different connotation from that used by Hideo Kishimoto (Kishimoto 1967, 84f.).

In the most central and extensive work of Tillich, his “Systematic Theology” (ST), we can find a qualification of the term “ecstasy” in connection with his discussion of human reason and the place of reason in a religious (Christian) context. I quote:

“‘Ecstasy’ (‘standing outside one’s self’) points to a state of mind which is extraordinary in the sense that the mind transcends its ordinary situation. Ecstasy is not a negation of reason, it is the state of mind in which reason is beyond itself, that is, beyond its subject-object structure. In being beyond itself reason does not deny itself. ‘Ecstatic reason’ remains reason; it does not receive anything irrational or antirational—which it could not do without selfdestruction—but it transcends the basic condition of finite rationality, the subject-object structure” (Tillich 1951, 111f.).

How shall we look at this quotation? Can we give it any unambiguous meaning? If so, can the statements in the quotation have some scientifically acceptable meaning? In trying to answer these questions, I must first present some profound features in the structure of the whole of Tillich’s thinking.³

When looking at Tillich’s ideas, it is very important to remember that he strives to be both a philosopher of religion and a Christian theologian, and that these two roles are different, according to Tillich. The philosopher of religion works on a different level from the theologian (Tillich 1951, 9f.). In any analysis of his thinking it is therefore necessary to discriminate between Tillich’s philosophical and his theological statements. Let us first examine some aspects of Tillich’s philosophical thought.

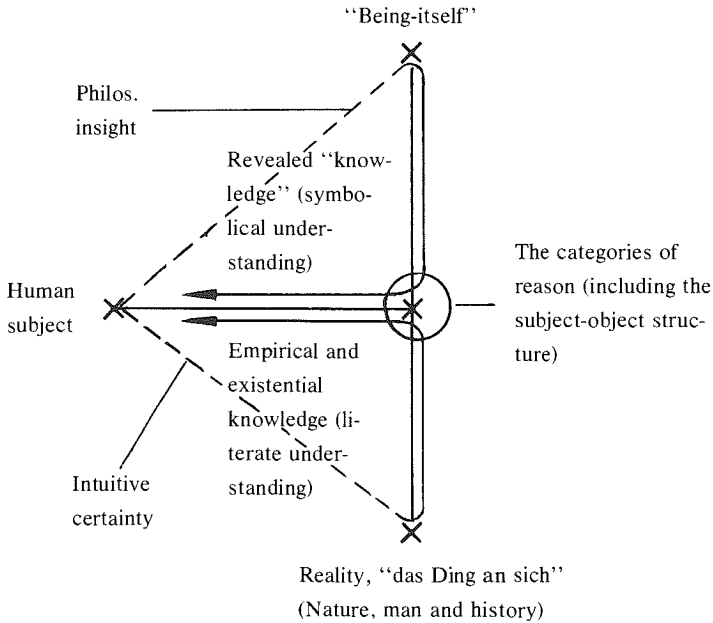
With the help of the following figure it is possible to portray some of the most profound elements in Tillich’s philosophy of religion.

In a way Tillich follows Kant in maintaining that the human subject structures “being” (reality)⁴ with the help of categories of reason. The most important and profound category is what Tillich calls “the basic

³ There is a high degree of continuity and consistency in Tillich’s production from the early 20’s until 1965. This makes it important to look at Tillich’s early works on the philosophy of science and religion in order to understand his later major work “Systematic Theology” (ST). This fact was pointed out very early in research into Tillich’s production (Rhein 1957, 16). Quite recently Joachim Track and Anders Jeffner, for example, have pointed to the same fact (Track 1975, 429 notes 36 and 37; Jeffner 1979, 251).

⁴ I here assume that, when Tillich in this part of ST speaks of “being”, he means the same thing we usually do when we talk about “reality”.

Tillich does not himself use the Kantian term “das Ding-an-sich”. His discussion of criticism in his early works nevertheless makes it illuminating to put this term in the figure, in my view (Tillich 1959 a, 309; 1959 b, 236).



ontological structure" namely the subject-object structure (Tillich also talks of the self-world structure). Tillich does not find it necessary in ST to make a decision about the degree of truth of the different types of theories of the relation between the mind (subjective reason) and reality (objective reason). The important thing is that there is an interaction between the mind and reality⁵ (Tillich 1951, 164 ff., 75 ff. Cf. Tillich 1959 b, 235 f.).

Reality, which according to this can be the object of knowledge, consists of inorganic and organic nature, man and history.⁶

Tillich also follows Kant when he denies the possibility of scientific metaphysics (Tillich 1959 b, 251 f.). In spite of this, Tillich makes a big thing

⁵ Tillich is not satisfied with the Kantian way of pursuing philosophy. In his writings from the 20's Tillich stresses that the subject has an intuitive certainty of the object, not only that it exists (just as Kant was certain that there must be a "Ding-an-sich"), but also that it has the qualities which our knowledge says it has. According to Tillich, we can grasp the "essence" of things (Tillich 1959 a, 309, 313; 1959 b, 235 ff.).

⁶ For Tillich's view on the structure of reality, see Tillich 1963 b, 15-28. Helmut Elsässer has made a most illustrating figure of this side

of Tillich's thinking (Elsässer 1976, 19). See also Tillich's presentation of "Real"—and "Geisteswissenschaften" in Tillich 1959 b.

The knowledge of this reality can in Tillich's view be of a more technical, controlling type or a more existential kind. Here the words of language can also be taken more or less literally. The words immediately grasp reality, according to Tillich (Tillich 1951, 98 f). This side of his epistemology, though it is most interesting, is of minor importance for the problem which occupies us here.

of the so-called ontological argument for the existence of God. Tillich does not mean that the argument could prove the existence of God. The value of it is not in its trying to prove anything. What the argument points out is that the *question* of God is universally valid and philosophically necessary. The philosophical analysis that we meet in the argument gives a description of the way in which potential infinity is present in actual finiteness. What we meet here, present in finitude, is according to Tillich an element which nonetheless transcends this finitude.

“All elaborations /of the argument/ have shown the presence of something unconditional within the self and the world” (Tillich 1951, 206).

This unconditional element Tillich calls “*being-itself*”. However, he stresses that he does not assert by this the existence of a highest being, called being-itself. What comes forth here is “an analytical dimension in the structure of reality”. Being-itself is the necessary condition for the self-world, or subject-object structure of reality. In being a necessary condition for the subject-object structure it cannot itself be an object within that same structure (Tillich 1951, 204–208).

What Tillich asserts here is that we have a philosophically valid, and therefore for the whole of mankind common, way to an unconditional element in “reality” as we understand it. This is a very central point in Tillich’s thought, which he has elaborated in many works, for example in his “Religionsphilosophie” and also in his most famous “The courage to be”.⁷ In my figure I try to illustrate this thought with the line that indicates philosophical insight in “being-itself”. The term “insight” which I have chosen to use is perhaps too strong. It may invoke the idea of a content, of which it is possible to have some philosophical knowledge. But this is just the opposite of what Tillich seems to be after. Through philosophy we arrive at an awareness of an unconditional premise for the human predicament. In this respect Tillich has, in my opinion, often been misinterpreted.

⁷ As everyone knows, Tillich can also talk of religion as “our ultimate concern”. The problems with this concept I will not discuss here. Here we are interested in the concept “being-itself”.

In “Religionsphilosophie” from 1925 he starts from the concept of meaning, and points out that our consciousness of context of meaning presupposes some ground, an *unconditional meaning* which is the guarantee of every particular case of meaning (Tillich 1959 a, 318 f.).

In “The courage to be” Tillich talks about “God above God” as that which is present in a state of utmost despair, as the last straw to catch at—namely *the fact that you are in despair*. Here we see the paradox that every active negativism must say yes to itself in order to be able to negate itself. (Tillich 1962, 165 ff., 178 f. I must apologize for using the Swedish translation, but the English original was not available when I wrote this.)

Examples abound both in the Scandinavian and in Anglo-Saxon literature.⁸

This same point, which constitutes the premise for the whole of human culture, is also the premise for religion and its elaboration of the concept of God. Two quotations may serve to sum up the two main points which Tillich finds “hidden” in the classical ontological argument for God:

“Nothing is more important for philosophy and theology than the truth it /the ontological argument/ contains, the acknowledgement of the unconditional element in the structure of reason and reality.”

“Unless such an /unconditional/ element were present, the question of God never could have been asked, nor could an answer, even the answer of revelation, have been received” (Tillich 1951, 208 and 206).

Philosophy cannot give any content to “being-itself”. But that is just what *religions* try to do, according to Tillich. In the various religious traditions we find concrete expressions of this ultimate reality. But according to Tillich we cannot take the religious expressions of the ultimate (“being-itself”) literally. Our language only works adequately within the subject-object structure. When we wish to say something about “being-itself” we must always use language metaphorically, or as Tillich says it *symbolically*.⁹ Religious language speaks entirely in symbols about God according to Tillich (Tillich 1951., 238 ff.; 1963 a, 8 ff.).

⁸ A Swedish psychologist of religion, Hans Åkerberg, has expressed the opinion that in Tillich’s talk about “God above God” we meet the faith of *the most mature religious sentiment* (Åkerberg 1977, XL1f.). This is perhaps true from a psychological point of view, but it does not do justice to Tillich’s own way of thinking, in my view. For Tillich, the point “God above God” or “the unconditional” is the *starting-point* of religion. A religion cannot live with only this “pure point”, it must have some symbolical expressions besides that.

The American philosopher of religion, Malcolm Diamond, claims in his very penetrating presentation of Tillich’s thoughts, that Tillich in ST says that we become aware of being-itself through ecstatic reason (Diamond 1974, 328 f.). This would mean that awareness of the unconditional presupposition belonged to the theological realm (see below, note 10). In fact the treatment of this presupposition in ST belongs to the *philosophical* part of the book. That is, the insight is of a kind which does not demand any “ecstatic reason” according to Tillich.

Some Swedish discussions of Tillich’s the-

ory make a similar mistake. They take the concept “being-itself” as if it had some content, as if it were a Christian concept of God (For example Aulén 1965, 157 ff.; Nygren 1972, 320 ff.). As we have seen, it is not Tillich’s intention to say anything like this.

Nevertheless, this mistake by the interpreters is understandable. Tillich’s terminology is often very vague. In ST I Tillich does say that the statement “God is being-itself” is a nonsymbolic assertion, the only nonsymbolic statement about God. In ST II he, however, corrects this statement (Tillich 1951, 237, 239; 1963 a, 9).

⁹ We have here the background to Tillich’s famous theory of religious symbols. Because religious symbolism was the focus of the preceding volume in *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis*, and Tillich’s theory of symbols there was presented by Haralds Biezais, I do not intend to go any further into this question here (Biezais 1979, IX f., XIV f.). A good presentation of the whole of Tillich’s theory of symbols can be found in Diamond 1974, 339–354. An interesting interpretation is given in Jeffner 1972, 57 ff.

What religious language talks about always remains a *mystery*, says Tillich. Although “being-itself” is not open to ordinary ways of acquiring knowledge, the awareness of the unconditional element constitutes a need for some sort of knowledge of that element. How can this symbolical knowledge be obtained, according to Tillich? This always happens through *revelation*, says Tillich. It is in this connection we meet Tillich’s treatment of “ecstasy”.

It is important to stress that Tillich in his presentation of what he means by “revelation” points out that he here moves on a normative (and I would add a theological-religious)¹⁰ level (Tillich 1951, 106 ff.). From here on we see Tillich as a religious thinker, not as a philosopher of religion.

For Tillich’s treatment of revelation and knowledge of revelation there are three central concepts: *mystery*, *ecstasy* and *miracle*.

A revelation is something out of the ordinary which “removes the veil” from something hidden, something mysterious. What is hidden is not a mystery if it ceases to be mysterious after the “revelation”. Is it not then contradictory to speak of the revelation of a mystery? Not completely, answers Tillich. In the revelation there are cognitive elements, we know more of the mystery after a revelation, than before it: The reality of the mystery has become “a matter of experience” and our relation to the mystery has become a matter of experience (Tillich 1951, 108 f.). “The mystery” functions here as a symbol for what was previously called “being-itself”.

Every revelation has a subjective and an objective side, and they are both necessary for the revelation. Someone must be seized by the manifestation of the mystery and something must occur through which the mystery of revelation seizes someone, says Tillich. The subjective side is called *ecstasy*, the objective *miracle* (Tillich 1951, 111).

A miracle is not an event that happens in contradiction to the laws of nature. It “does not destroy the structure of being in which it becomes manifest”. It is an event which is astonishing, shaking, unusual in some way but which manifests itself in a natural phenomenon, in a man or in a historical event. It points to the mystery of being in some way. It is a miracle only if it is received by someone as a sign-event in an ecstatic experience, according to Tillich (Tillich 1951, 115 ff., 118 ff.).

¹⁰ Tillich’s treatment of the concept “revelation” in ST is placed in the section which deals with *the theological answer*, not in the one which elaborates *the philosophical question*. (For Tillich’s method of questions and answers, “the method of correlation”, see

Tillich 1951, 59 ff.) I take this as an argument for looking at “revelation” as something placed within what Tillich calls “the theological circle”, which presupposes that a theologian is religiously involved in his object.

The main characteristics of Tillich's view of religious ecstasy are contained in the quotation at the beginning of this paper. What we have now, is some instruments (thought-structures) which make it easier to understand how Tillich looks at ecstasy. That a miracle can point outside itself to "being-itself", the mystery, is, as we have seen, connected with the necessary condition that a human subject seizes this "self-transcending" of the event. As this transcends the normal categories of the subject's reason, the ecstatic experience means that reason is transcended, too. But Tillich underlines very strongly that this must not happen in a way that destroys reason. That means for one thing that the revelatory knowledge gained from the experience does not add anything to our knowledge of nature or of history. Neither does it give any knowledge about hidden things (metaphysics) or the like. But it has an objective side nonetheless. Much of what is called ecstasy, according to Tillich, lacks this objective side. In such a case it is not real ecstasy, only overexcitement. Overexcitement can be described purely in psychological terms, but that is impossible in the case of real ecstasy, says Tillich (Tillich 1951, 110, 112 ff.).

"Ecstasy transcends the psychological level, although it has a psychological side. It reveals something valid about the relation between the mystery of our being and ourselves. Ecstasy is the form in which that which concerns us unconditionally manifests itself within the whole of our psychological conditions. It appears through them. But it cannot be derived from them" (Tillich 1951, 113).

In Tillich's view rationality is so important an element of real ecstasy that it can be taken as a criterion which discriminates between ecstasy and demonic possession. Demonic possession always destroys the rational structure of the mind in some way, while genuine revelation never does that (Tillich 1951, 113 f.).

Summing up, then, it may be said that the cognitive quality of an ecstatic experience mediates some kind of knowledge, according to Tillich. It cannot mediate knowledge of finite objects or relations, the knowledge it gives must be about something else.

"It opens a new dimension of knowledge, the dimension of understanding in relation to our ultimate concern and to the mystery of being" (Tillich 1951, 115).

This is of course an example of religious symbolical knowledge which we have seen as a part of his philosophical ("meta-theological") theory. Religious knowledge, which is symbolical and which is expressed in symbolical language, does not conflict with our ordinary forms of knowledge, it does not "destroy reason".

I hope that I have given enough insight into Tillich's way of thinking to

make the quotation from which I started comprehensible. We can now see it as meaningful in the context of Tillich's "thought-world". It is also an example of how a modern Christian thinker can look at "ecstasy" (which does not, of course, mean that every modern theologian looks at these matters in the same way). It is also quite obvious from what we have seen that Tillich's way of treating the phenomenon "ecstasy" does not belong to religiology, if by that term is meant something that could be called an *empirical* scientific study of religion, which is, I think, the generally held view. Tillich would here be of the same opinion. Theology does not belong to the field of empirical, scientific study according to him.

Another question is whether his philosophy of religion is satisfactory, from a scientific point of view.

I think we can look at his philosophy of religion in a broader context. An important problem in the philosophy of religion since the Enlightenment has been how religious language and "religious knowledge" relate to scientific language and scientific knowledge, to put it simply. This development got its most acute expression in the discussion which started from the logical-positivists' criterion of meaning (the possibility of empirical verification). According to this religious language became meaningless. Tillich's philosophy of religion can be seen as an attempt to give meaning to religious language in a culture which is very much coloured by a scientific way of looking at things and of using language.¹¹

Seen from this point of view, Tillich's attempt is at least not without relevance for religiology. In a culture where the meaning of religious language is called in question, it cannot be a matter of indifference to religiology whether the religious language is regarded as having meaning or not. If we accept a philosophical theory of meaning which makes religious language meaningless, then religiology will function without conflict only as a historical discipline (because in historical time religious language can be said to have had some sort of meaning), or as a reductionistic behavioral science (religion is *nothing but* a psychological and sociological phenomenon). This way of looking at the matter is of course possible. What a philosopher of religion like Tillich is trying to point out, however, is that this is not the only way of looking at things. He tries to show that it is possible to regard religious language as meaningful even if you have a more or less scientific way of looking at the empirical world.

¹¹ The most important articles in the discussion of religion and the verification-criterion of meaning are to be found in "New Essays in Philosophical Theology" from 1955. Many

of the same articles are included in a book from 1975, "The Logic of God". A good analysis of the debate is given in Jeffner 1972.

If we in religiology wish to look at religious ecstasy as something meaningful even today, then we need philosophers of religion, like Paul Tillich.¹²

Anybody interested in a more detailed analysis of Tillich's thought can consult my doctoral dissertation. "Vetenskaplig teologi och dess samhällsrelation" (Scientific Theology and its Relation to Society.) In this thesis I discuss the question of theology as a scientific activity and its relation to church and society. I present three models, on the basis of the works of Paul Tillich, the Swede Anders Nygren and the German Wolfhart Pannenberg, the latter of whom also are both theologians and philosophers of religion.

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¹² By this I do not mean that Tillich's philosophy of religion is the only acceptable philosophy. I am not even sure if it is philosophically acceptable at all. All I want to stress is the importance of philosophical reflection upon

the meaning of religious language.—In this connection I also want to underline that the question of *meaning* is not the same as the question of *truth*. In my article I have not discussed the truth of the religious claims.

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