

# Tillich and God in Atlanta

## A Report on the 2015 Fall Meeting

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At Westar's fall meeting in Atlanta, the Seminar on God and the Human Future focused on the thought of one of the twentieth-century's most prominent theologians, Paul Tillich (1886–1965). The year 2015 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Paul Tillich, and it was right to focus both on his legacy and the radical edges of his thinking for today. Questions revolved around the radical aspects of Tillich's theology and their meaning when it comes to thinking about God.

### Russell Re Manning

Professor Russell Re Manning, Senior Lecturer in Philosophy and Ethics at Bath Spa University in England and editor of *Retrieving the Radical Tillich* (Palgrave 2015), was invited to join the Seminar in Atlanta. He presented two introductory talks on Tillich, which were followed by stimulating comments from Joe Bessler of Phillips Theological Seminary in Tulsa and Karmen MacKendrick of Le Moyne College in New York.

In the first presentation, Re Manning highlighted Tillich's theology of culture. Indeed, he emphasized how, for Tillich, theology is inherently embedded in, and not an enterprise set apart from, the conditions of human life and history. Unlike his influential contemporary Karl Barth (1886–1968), Tillich never severed the tie between theology and culture. As Re Manning emphasized, he overcame the gap between theology and culture by insisting that theology is always involved in the conditions of the culture.

There are three areas, Re Manning indicated, where Tillich's theology of culture stands out. One is evident in his early work, *The Socialist Decision*, set during the rise of Nazi Germany. In this book Tillich draws on the distinction between the "whence" (origin) and the "whither" (destination) of culture and holds that theology should be focused on the latter. He thus links theology to its cultural setting and describes it as that which challenges or calls culture beyond its present condition. Tillich set a call to authentic socialism against the threat of a false socialism. His distinction between true and false socialism was a warning about

the ideology of the German National Socialists (otherwise known as "Nazis"). The call of theology to challenge culture makes the theology of culture a critical foundation for reflecting on God and the human future.

A second radical edge to Tillich's thought is located, Re Manning suggested, in the question of faith. To Tillich faith involves dwelling in doubt. This form of dwelling invokes the "courage" that Tillich would analyze in his popular book, *The Courage To Be* (1952). If faith is the act of dwelling in doubt, then for Tillich faith is a strategic form of atheism. It is the iconoclastic element of theology. Faith as strategic atheism—or radical doubt—establishes theology as the founding science of critical thinking. The cultural role of theology is to question the destination of culture, and this involves behaving as a type of cultural troublemaker. Theology seeks out the icons of culture and practices iconoclasm. This radical edge called strategic atheism (see below)—that is, dwelling in doubt of the cultural gods—secures the relevancy of theology in any cultural setting.

Toward the end of Tillich's life, according to Re Manning, Tillich's third edge of radicality emerged in relation to world religions. Tillich realized that a new context for theology involved awareness of world religions. This new context was part of what we now call the global culture. Tillich realized that the encounter with world religions widens the understanding of one's own religious tradition. A new and wider understanding of religion means that a theology of culture cannot be reduced to a single (Christian) culture. Theology must address the global scene where cultures clash. A single religion, whether Christianity or another, can no longer limit its vision of truth to its own, singular tradition. The new setting of world religion challenges every religious tradition to develop deeper and more inclusive elements within their tradition through dialogue with other traditions as authentic as their own.

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In addition to these radical elements in Tillich there are two terms central to his theology that require examination: the "unconditional" and the "conditional." The first, the unconditional, identifies that which is never historically present but is always the presupposition of history and the present. It is the foundation or principle of life. Today we might describe it as the energy that makes life possible, that must be in place for particular forms of life to be. For Tillich it is impossible to raise a question about God or any other subject without there first being a foundation or principle or energy out of which the question arises. This necessary foundation can never be reduced to a "thing"

but is always the principle (the ground) of things. This is why Tillich calls the principle of life the unconditional.

The conditional, on the other hand, is that which exists in history and in time. It consists of things that we experience and that form our circumstances in life. The conditional includes our genetic codes and the foibles of our personalities. It includes the social elements of our lives and the political makeup of our cultures, the things out of which we understand the world and from which we reach for tomorrow. Conditional elements always change and always move; they are always that in which we are caught up. Because these elements are conditional they are not and cannot be unconditional. But the unconditional is always presupposed in the conditional.

In responding to Re Manning, Joe Bessler commented on the responsibility of theology to name those conditional matters that are treated as if they were unconditional. Bessler argued that this task makes theology a political activity. That is to say, theology should critically engage what society holds to be unconditional or sacred or untouchable. In many cases this untouchable element is "God." In other cases the untouchable is a specific political ideology merged with a favorite religion. To Bessler, theology plays a disruptive role in the midst of the cultural temptation to pose conditional elements as unconditional. Tillich's ability to raise such criticism continues to define him as both a relevant and radical theologian.

Re Manning offered a second talk on Tillich that highlighted what is meant in particular by strategic atheism, a

## Fall 2015 Ballot Items

God is unchanging.

Fellows: **Black** / Associates: **Black**

Every theological statement is also a political statement that reveals assumptions regarding human sociality and the political.

Fellows: **Red** / Associates: **Red**

The attempt to prove the existence of God is a denial of the theological enterprise.

Fellows: **Red** / Associates: **Pink**

Atheism is not the opposite of faith; atheism is an element of faith.

Fellows: **Pink** / Associates: **Pink**

form of "a-theism" that needs to be distinguished from two others: imitative atheism and residual atheism. Imitative atheism is that form of atheism that simply replaces God with Reason but otherwise holds to the basic project of theology, which is to understand the nature (being) of the world. Residual atheism includes those forms of atheism that seek to fulfill the theological project of criticism without using theological terms. Thus, it is "residual" in the sense that it holds to theology or lies in the shadow of theology but substitutes non-theological language. Tillich inspires a third option, which can be called strategic atheism. It is atheism used in the act of radical criticism. It need not



Left to right: Westar Fellows Robert Miller, John Dominic Crossan, Pam Eisenbaum, Lane McCaughy, Arthur Dewey and Perry Kea at the Fall 2015 meeting in Atlanta.

be anti-theological; in fact it can be useful to theology in dispelling the power of theological norms. For example we can say that, because the historical Jesus brings into question traditional Christian dogmas and understandings of divinity, he inspires a form of strategic atheism in relation to theological norms.

Karmen MacKendrick responded with the challenge to expand the platform of thought associated with Tillich. Discussing the theology of culture and the ways in which it encourages strategic re-evaluations of theology, MacKendrick raised questions about the concept of Being in Tillich. Tillich is often criticized for holding to a traditional, static, and unmoved understanding of Being. The “ground of Being,” as it is expressed in Tillich, is not dissimilar to the Neo-Platonic notion of the unmoved One. MacKendrick extended Tillich’s theology of culture to include the dynamism of being in pantheism, which brings nature into the idea of culture. Tillich rarely acknowledged nature as part of the cultural makeup of any given moment. The introduction of elements formerly distanced from theology such as the physical, the natural, the un-natural, and even the “un-desired” haunt culture and, as such, haunt Tillich. Adding these “unbounded” and “impure” elements to the domain of theology shifts the ground of the question about theology and culture. MacKendrick argued that Tillich’s theology of culture is able to incorporate material elements usually ignored in the development of his thought. In this sense, MacKendrick reminded us, the potential of the radical Tillich enables an even more radical Tillich than first imagined.

## Two Seminar Papers

The final thoughts offered in the God Seminar were in two papers from Jeffrey Robbins of Lebanon College in Pennsylvania and Clayton Crockett of the University of Central Arkansas. Robbins asked the Seminar to think about Tillich’s theology as more than another form of static onto-theology. The phrase “onto-theology” refers to that form of theology that engages “being” as the foundational and unchanging element of theological study. For example, Augustine’s (354–430 CE) theology united the Greek concept of being with the biblical God. For Augustine being and truth are united as the unchanging nature of God. In another example, Tillich consistently talked about God as the foundation of being, suggesting that while conditional circumstances can change, the being of God cannot. Robbins employed the thought of French philosopher Catherine Malabou, who emphasizes the plasticity (adaptability, changeability, re-routing-ability) of the human

brain. Robbins argued that Tillich’s onto-theology is a form of plasticity or (even) onto-plasticity, which means that his thought is adaptable. It is set on a theology of culture, and culture is ever changing and adaptable. As examples of the instability of cultural theology, Robbins then introduced new materials in theology, feminist theology, black theology, and queer theology. All these demonstrate how theology can change or re-route itself, how it can be “plastic,” before new cultural challenges and the call for justice.

Crockett talked about Tillich’s “spectral influence” on theology, an influence that touches many new emergent forms of theology. In particular, Crockett emphasized Tillich’s influence on political theology. Tillich’s God is

always the God beyond the Sovereign God of tradition. In raising this side of Tillich’s thought, Crockett drew attention to the distinction between the real and the symbolic. Theology is always embedded in the symbolic, and in Tillich the symbolic is the focused power of theology. In the United States, for example, the motto “In God We Trust” is not just a set of words but a symbol that attracts to it a set of ideologies or normative expectations. For many Americans, “In God We Trust” is the symbol of the United States as a Christian nation. For others, such as Harry Truman, the symbol

expresses the anti-communist thrust of American history. But reality, the real, can interrupt the symbol such that symbols can lose power, change, or over time signify different emotions or ideas. In this sense Tillich’s “God-beyond-God” is also inevitably a God that undermines God. Since the undermining happens at a cultural level, it is specifically political. It is, or can be, the inspiration of political revision and even revolution. In this sense the radical nature of theology, as well as its danger, is its ability to re-symbolize reality.

## Summary

The God Seminar is still in its early stages. The focus on Tillich, however, enabled discussion to develop along two helpful lines. One was the reminder that theology is directed toward the edges of human thought and experience, what Tillich called the “wither” of culture. The second was a reminder about the experimental nature of theology. Unlike biblical and historical studies that are grounded on understanding the past, the theological enterprise is directed toward an imagined future. The imagined future is that element that interrupts the present situation in which we live with a call to move forward, with courage, to new questions and insights. This second insight about “the call” relates to the unconditional that always bring the conditional present into question. **4R**

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