Paul Tillich’s *Systematic Theology* Interpreted As Being His Spiritual Autobiography

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The real subject of Paul Tillich’s three-volume *Systematic Theology* is not God but rather the history of Tillich’s personal relationship with God. The religious experiences to which Tillich refers in this, his major work, are his own, although he never admits it. This article attempts to draw parallels between Tillich’s mystical development and that of other mystics. Questions are raised about the possibility of mystical voices, visions, ecstasies, raptures and deliria being symptoms of schizophrenia.

*Keywords*: mysticism, schizophrenia, theology

**Introduction**

In her classic study of Christian mysticism entitled *Mysticism*, Evelyn Underhill describes what she calls “the Mystic Way” (Underhill, 1921, p. 165). Having analyzed all the available writings of European mystics, she comes to the conclusion that there are three recognizable stages through which all mystics pass and that they come in the same chronological order. They can be designated as: (1) revelation, (2) estrangement, (3) redemption. Tillich’s *Systematic Theology* describes each of these stages, with Volume I being dedicated to revelation, Volume II to estrangement and Volume III to redemption. Throughout this monumental theological endeavour, the spiritual experiences to which Tillich refers are mostly his own, while other sources from the Bible and religious writers are also discussed. We shall look at each of the three volumes in turn while bearing in mind Underhill’s Mystic Way.

**Volume I: Revelation**

The Mystic Way begins when God reveals Himself to the mystic. This happens through religious ecstasy and often takes the form of a vision or voices. The Eternal breaks into the temporal, God reveals Himself while remaining veiled, He is seen as being the ground of all being Who both permeates and transcends all that is. The mystic becomes God’s servant and makes God his ultimate concern Whom he must worship and serve until his death. What the mystic experiences is ineffable and totally incomprehensible for those who have not had a similar experience. This revelation is also labeled an illumination, an awakening or a conversion experience. It changes the mystic forever, making him what Tillich calls a New Being. Tillich says: “In the history of religion, revelatory
Tillich insists that the source of systematic theology must be personal experience: “The sources of systematic theology can be sources only for one who participates in them, that is, through experience” (Tillich, 1951, p. 40). It is obvious here that Tillich is referring to his own mystical experience in which God revealed Himself to Tillich. The problem for Tillich was that he was never able to say clearly that he had had revelatory ecstasies for fear that people would have thought that he was mentally ill. He confided to his secretary at Harvard, Grace Cali, that he was a schizophrenic (Cali, 1995, p. 20). It would have been impossible for him to admit that his theology was based on his schizophrenia, as it would have brought about the end of his career. His detractors might have renamed his trilogy Systematic Schizophrenia.

We know that Tillich was hospitalized twice for a psychosis as a result of the very traumatic events that he had suffered in the battles of eastern France during the First World War, the first time in 1916 and the second time in 1918. He refers to this tribulation in Volume I: “Only those who have experienced the shock of transitoriness, the anxiety in which they are aware of their finitude, the threat of nonbeing, can understand what the notion of God means” (Tillich, 1951, pp. 61-62). Today we give this form of mental illness the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder. In Tillich’s time it was called “shell shock.” Here Tillich admits that his notion of God comes from his close encounters with death on the battlefield. In other words, we can be certain that the moment of his revelatory experience occurred some time during the First World War.

**Volume II: Estrangement**

After the ecstatic revelatory experience that Tillich describes in Volume I, he portrays the estrangement that inevitably follows, in Volume II. All mystics pass through what Saint John of the Cross named La noche oscura del alma, the Dark Night of the Soul. It can be seen as alienation, despair, bewilderment, the idea that God has abandoned the mystic, and meaninglessness. In its worst form it becomes an acute paranoid psychosis. Tillich says: “Long stretches of ‘dryness of the soul’ follow moments of ecstasy, and the predicament of men generally is not changed because the conditions of existence are left untouched” (Tillich, 1957, p. 83).

Tillich develops here his idea that “sin is estrangement” (Tillich, 1957, p. 57). In other words, he equates sin with mental illness. Being estranged, alienated and in despair is characteristic of any dark night of the soul. Sin is no longer a moral error that one commits but rather a state of spiritual malaise. In this condition of psychological illness, the mystic undergoes “the turning away from God, and from ‘the grace’ or reunion with God” (Tillich, 1957, p. 57). This concept of sin is certainly very different from that of Roman Catholic theology and Tillich knew it. Tillich thought quite rightly that his equation of sin with mental illness and grace with mental health would make Christian theology interesting for modern men and women who had lost all patience with a legalistic approach to sin and virtue.

**Volume III: Redemption**

Volume III describes what Underhill identifies as “the unitive life” (Underhill, 1911, p. 413). It is a state of grace characterized by good mental health, peace of mind, purposefulness, service to the community, and the joyful worship of God. The mystic remembers his first ecstatic revelation of the past with a new appreciation, and
even the memory of his painful dark night of the soul no longer threatens him. Tillich describes this as “unambiguous life” (Tillich, 1963, p. 107), “self-integration” (p. 32), “universal and individual fulfilment” (p. 406), “faith in the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern” (p. 130), “spiritual community” (p. 151) and “healing and salvation” (p. 277).

Tillich’s own life, as he lived it in the United States from 1933 until his death in 1965, reflected this happy stage of the Mystic Way. He developed a career that brought him the reputation of being the greatest Protestant theologian since Martin Luther or even the most important Christian theologian since Augustine. He wrote and published numerous books and articles in English, which he began learning at the age of 47 upon his arrival in America. He quite rightly gained universal admiration for his relentless opposition to the Nazis.

Evelyn Underhill is one of many theologians who admire the amazing accomplishments of mystics once they arrive at this final stage of their mystical development, the unitive life. She says that it is characterized by “a complete sense of freedom, an invulnerable serenity, and usually urges the self to some form of heroic effort or creative activity” (Underhill, 1911, p. 416).

Tillich had to hide the history of his mental illness so that people would not lose confidence in his ideas. He makes oblique references to it throughout his writings. Even in the Paul Tillich Park of New Harmony, Indiana, there is a granite slab with these words: “Paul Tillich, estranged and re-united, the New Being.” “Estranged” refers to the second phase of the Mystic Way and “re-united” to the third phase. Tillich here compares himself to Jesus Christ, Whom he named “the New Being,” and quite rightly so, since Tillich was correct in seeing that Jesus had also gone through the same stages of the Mystic Way. If Jesus talked about the Kingdom of Heaven with such authority, it was because he had seen it in a Beatific Vision, which we today call a schizophrenic hallucination. Tillich understood Jesus better than other theologians because they were both schizophrenic mystics. A young Tillich scholar once told me that he would like so much to have a Beatific Vision. I replied that he should never say such a thing, since it meant that he desired to be a schizophrenic, and life can have no mental illness more dreadful or horrific than schizophrenia.

**My Own Mystic Way**

I know exactly when the three stages of my own Mystic Way occurred. The revelation happened in August 1963 when I was seventeen years old. It was a Beatific Vision. It followed one year of psychiatric torture called conversion therapy. The next month I started reading Tillich’s books. My period of estrangement began on March 28, 1965, when I met Tillich and presented him my essay about my religious experience entitled “The Phenomenological Proof of God” and he responded by announcing in Harvard’s Memorial Church that the Son of Man was in our presence. It was the last sermon of his life. Two days later I was hospitalized in McLean Hospital and gained my liberty fifteen months later. It was truly a dark night of the soul. My redemption occurred in two stages: the first was when I discovered my revolutionary friend Mark Frechette (1947-1975), whose love for me quite literally cured my schizophrenia. I met him in June 1966. The second stage of my salvation started in June 1968, when I left the United States forever and moved to Europe. There I discovered a peace of mind and serenity that I had never known in America. I began to realize that I had been the victim of living in a truly sick society. I was right in thinking that the social, cultural and political atmosphere of the United States would continue to deteriorate.
Throughout my life, I have been fascinated by the relationship between theology and schizophrenia. If it is true that Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jesus and Tillich were all schizophrenics, does it mean that there is no truth in Judeo-Christian religions? Or does it mean that the ultimate Truth, which is God, is revealed only to schizophrenics? When I had my Beatific Vision in 1963, I told myself exactly what Isaiah said after his own Beatific Vision: “Then said I, Woe is me! For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts” (Isaiah 6:5 in the Bible). But I added another sentence to my complaint: this vision means that I am a schizophrenic. Isaiah ran around Jerusalem naked shouting messages from God and people said that he was a prophet. I ran around McLean Hospital naked shouting messages from God and people said that I was a schizophrenic. Isaiah and I had the same type of weird behaviour. All that changed was the vocabulary of the period.

In the two most important books about religious experiences, Underhill’s *Mysticism* and William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*, there is no mention of schizophrenia, but simply because they had been written before the term “schizophrenia,” which was coined in 1908 by the Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler, became well known.

**Conclusion**

I sincerely believe that religious faith is good for mental health and I think that my life story proves it. In 1965 psychiatrists gave me the diagnosis of “acute and chronic schizophrenia” and told my parents that they should sell their house in order to pay for a life-long confinement in insane asylums. Since I was released in 1966, I have enjoyed a most wonderful, productive and happy life without once consulting a psychiatrist or taking psychiatric medicine. There is certainly an element of the miraculous in what I have done with my life, and I attribute it to my religious faith. You can read my story in my book *What Rough Beast*.

Paul Tillich, by his covenant with me, achieved a metempsychosis, called *Seelenwanderung* in German, and thus conquered death. Both he and I were convinced that God had brought us together. Psychiatrists would diagnose our meeting as “une folie à deux.”

This is the enigma: it is possible that we schizophrenics have given Judeo-Christian religions to the world, and yet great benefits such as redemption, salvation and the healing of lost souls and broken minds have resulted from the religious faith that these religions have made possible.

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