

ONTOLOGICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASES OF PLURALISM

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Plurality is a contemporary fact with which discussions of unity or commonality need to begin. This is not to say that heterogeneous aspects of the human race and human thinking were not known before; but it is to say that that heterogeneity plays a much larger role in our consciousness than was the case when communication was more restricted than today. Not only is that the case with our consciousness of heterogeneity; it is also true that recent philosophy and theology, particularly that part of it influenced by dialectical theology of the 1920s and by Heidegger's reading of the ontotheological tradition in Western thought, has been explicitly concerned with providing a categorical place for otherness, for the "not" and the negative, which cannot be accommodated in a metaphysics of identity. These developments put questions of unity and quests for community into a framework in which unity needs to be sought not with the intention of producing uniformity but with the hope of finding a community which prevents diversity from being mere chaos and makes heterogeneity creative instead of destructive of human understanding. Broadly viewed, the last two centuries seem to have produced more diversity than unity: not only has the unity of ontotheological metaphysics been broken, the sciences have also become, since the nineteenth century, independent of philosophy as well as of theology, and, within the particular

sciences, branches have developed that tend toward separation from their own roots. Institutions and intelligence thus lead toward diversity and isolation. No longer does philosophy provide the basic concepts upon which the sciences draw. Rather, the empirical sciences in the main fashion categories, when they need new ones, from the language of everyday understanding; they do not draw upon articulated cosmologies or metaphysical systems. Hence, the pluralism of the modern world includes both a consciousness of heterogeneity and diversity that is due to the possibilities of world-wide communication and also an isolation that is due to the independence of units within the whole. A quick survey of contemporary thought might indeed make one think the diversity so great that any quest for unity is foredoomed to failure. What keeps the quest alive is, nevertheless, that along with theoretical, practical, and institutional diversification has also come a greater sense of an underlying oneness, however inarticulate it be.

In its consciousness of pluralism our age is different from that of the Enlightenment, when there was an underlying conviction that human subjectivity is universal and uniform, so that what is rational anywhere is rational everywhere. In the meantime, a historical consciousness has been developed which calls into question such a conviction. This is not to say that anyone seriously disputes the universality of basic laws of thinking such as the law of identity ("A is A," or "If A is A,

then A is A"). But it is to say that such laws operate at a level of abstraction which makes them of little use in the adjudication of actual conflicts of opinion and that the Enlightenment slogan of "Think for yourself" does not necessarily lead to uniformity of judgments. It is to say, furthermore, that there is no way of deciding whether such laws are only laws for thinking or also laws of being. Metaphysically, it may be true that an object so defined as to involve a contradiction cannot exist at all--there cannot therefore be any such thing as a square circle--but in actuality we have to do not with pure rational objects but with things that both do and do not fit under such rational laws. Hence, it is possible, as post-Kantian philosophy showed, to develop two comprehensive and consistent metaphysical systems (critical-idealist and dogmatic-realist) which contradict each other but cannot refute each other.¹

In the present essay, I take up the question whether pluralism is only a historical fact or whether it has ontological and theological roots. I conclude that it has such roots and that, consequently, a quest for unity must take into account what Paul Tillich called the creativity of standpoints.

I. The Quest for Unity and Community

The quest for unity, which seems to have deep roots in human being, takes a number of different forms. But characteristic of the quest is that unity is something which needs to be sought,

whereas plurality is the given. One faces the manifold of the world, but looks for its unity. Sensation is faced with the manifoldness of percepta; the unity needs to be abstracted from it in the form of common names and generic concepts. At least, that seems to be the case if one considers the history of thought. Diversity is the given; unity, the sought.

In the intellectual history of the West, which has advanced under the double banner of Greek philosophy and biblical religion, the unity appears philosophically and theologically in the identity of God and being. The one in the many is to on, that which is in everything that is at all, and also the ehyeh asher ehyeh, the "I am I" that names the deity whose power is beyond that of the gods and idols. That this God is identical with being is the principle at the basis of the medieval system--Deus est esse ipsum. The link between the two is provided by the intermediate concept of the first or the supreme and by the act of naming or understanding the one as the other--the act of understanding or naming, for example, the first cause as God.

A second phase of this development, however, is marked by the quest for a unity in freedom that is distinct from unities in nature. One might associate this phase with the Enlightenment or, generally, with the modern period. Nature presents unities of manifolds in the form of living organisms. The unity is the centeredness of the organism, which enables the members to form an articulated whole that is more than the mechanical sum of its

parts. There are human reflections of such organic unities in the form of tribes or families. But the question is whether human freedom can form communities different from, or additional to, these natural communities. Can voluntary associations have an organizing center comparable to the living things of nature? Can freedom be organized as such, or does freedom need to be restricted in order to maintain the vitality of an organism? The organic character of a family depends upon the different roles played by parents and children and by younger and older members. A community of freedom, by contrast, does not seem to contain a principle for differentiation of roles and participation but seems to depend, rather, upon equal participation by all members, with equal freedom, in a common endeavor. How is one to conceive concretely of such a free community, if not in the manner of an organism?

Two different concepts have been used for this purpose. One is Martin Buber's notion of the "between,"² which is akin to the notion of "interest" (inter-esse = being between) as it has been developed more recently by Habermas and the Frankfurt school. Buber saw this as one of the major problems of the twentieth century because of the way in which social, economic, and political forces are driving societies in two opposite directions, toward collectivism and toward individualism. Each of these, however, is ultimately incompatible with free human community because collectivism sacrifices individuals as parts to the whole and

individualism sacrifices the common welfare to individual arbitrariness. Both of them in the end destroy human community. It was in this connection that Buber sought to make use of the concept of the "between," that is, of a basis of community that is neither collectivist nor individualist but capable of uniting the two. As a concept it remained somewhat indefinite, but the direction in which it pointed was that of a human community in which the threat of collectivism and individualism are transformed when there appears something "between" human beings, "between" me and the other, which can be recognized by both and made the basis of common endeavor. Articulated freedom consists, according to this conception, not in a social or legal organization but in a common effort to grasp and embody what is "between" each and all. There cannot be free community where the part is sacrificed to the whole, or the whole to the part, but only where the part and the whole are simultaneously fulfilled by relation to this element that is between all members.

A second way of conceiving the unity of freedom is the one, represented by Tillich, which has to do with the notion of a system of freedom. Systematic concepts were developed, particularly in idealist philosophy, with the aim of finding a thought-form that would grasp or reflect the living character of things. A systematic concept is intended to understand a thing not only for what it is as a present object (as is the case when I think of something as a tree, for example) but also according to how it

comes to be, how it is related to other things, and how it passes away. A notable example of this kind of system is Schleiermacher's work The Christian Faith. For Schleiermacher's understanding of dogmatics is that dogmatics is to provide an articulated system of dialectically formed concepts which exactly mirrors the religious feeling that provides the living unity of a religious community at a given time and place. If carried out successfully, such a dogmatic system is an accurate reflection of the living soul of a religious community and can be used for diagnosing the state of health of that community. In today's terms, we might say it is a conceptual model of the religious community.

Schleiermacher's system went even further by including an account of how the different religions are related to each other, depending on whether the esthetic (the natural and sensible) or the ethical (the free and spiritual) predominated and upon the degree to which the absoluteness of the religious feeling, the feeling of absolute dependence (schlechthinniges Abhängigkeitsgefühl) was manifest in the religion. The aspect of such systematic arrangements of religions which places them under suspicion today is that the superior expression of religion always turns out to be the one to which the systematician belongs: for Schleiermacher, Christianity. That seems to indicate that the systematic thinking is itself an expression of the religion rather than an "objective" (if one can use that word in this connection) view of the religions.

Indeed, such systematic arrangements of religion indicate a stage of development in Western theology itself. At one time it might have been possible to see Christianity as the true religion and other religions as false. Schleiermacher, characteristically for the nineteenth century, saw the diversity of religion differently--not as the many ways in which the one true religion could be corrupted, but as the progressive development of the religious consciousness in the course of human history. The problem connected with the effort to see such developments--as Ernst Troeltsch showed in his analyses of the historicity of all thinking³--is that there is no standpoint outside the whole development from which to view it. Inevitably, therefore, the point from which one does the viewing conditions the judgment about what one sees. That allows the possibility that there is more than one such system--that, e.g., an Islamic theologian might view the development differently from a Protestant Christian, and, if so, the different systematic views would undercut the unity of the systematic view itself. Systematic thinking, which begins by trying to see life in the fullness of its manifestation, ends then by seeing it from only one point of view. That raises the question of the possibility of unity in the midst of different and conflicting systems themselves. At heart, this is the problem of the roots of pluralism.

II. Ontological and Theological Bases of Pluralism

Some preliminary definitions may be helpful at this point in order to focus the discussion. To say that pluralism has an ontological basis is to say that there is an element of plurality contained in the ontological structure itself, that is, in the structure which is implied in any thinking of being at all. To say that it has a theological basis is to say that there is, similarly, a pluralistic element in the response to the power of religious symbols (or in what Tillich called "ultimate concern," as the state of being ultimately concerned about what concerns us ultimately).⁴ That there is an element of plurality in the structure means that there is a structure of differentiation in subjectivity itself, so that the difference between subject and other subject ("I" and the "other") is as irreducible as is the difference between subject and object ("I" and "universe").

That pluralism is so rooted is far from obvious. We all can recognize, of course, the differences that exist among individuals in a society and among societies, the differences in view or in standpoint that lead to different understandings of the world and different shapings of society. We can just as easily recognize the fact of diversity in religious traditions. To assert, however, that this diversity has ontological and theological roots, and is not merely a matter of empirical fact, is to assert that, among other things, no purpose is served by striving for a common view of the world or that, to put it differently, it would be as mistaken to expect such a unity as it

is a mistake to interpret the world in terms that are merely idealistic or merely materialistic, merely the result of subjective acts or merely the result of objective givenness. But how does one determine whether such a pluralism does have such roots?

To answer this question adequately would require more than the space of an essay. But we can give the outline of an answer, which will be sufficient for purposes here. One determines what belongs to the basic ontological structure by analyzing what is necessarily implied in any act of the thinking of being ("this is a tree"; "a tree is a woody perennial plant ... "; and so on). In Tillich's account, more specifically, the analysis starts by analyzing what is implied in asking the ontological question "Why is there anything at all?" If it is impossible to deny an element of the structure without using that very element, that is an indication, or a proof, that the element belongs to the ontological structure.⁵ Thus, every thinking of being (or every question) implies a subject and an object--an agent doing the thinking or asking and a matter about which the thinking or asking is done. One could only deny this subject-object structure by making use of it--that is, by making an assertion (as an agent, or subject) about something (about the matter under discussion). It is by applying the law of contradiction to the act of questioning or thinking or saying that the irreducible elements in the ontological structure are ascertained, for this

is a way of determining whether all, and not just some, thinking of being implies that structure. The subject-object structure is implied both when one asserts and when one denies that there is such a subject-object structure. Hence, this structure is ontological. (To avoid confusion, it should perhaps be added that in this analytical sense "ontology" does not mean the same as speculative metaphysics. For the givenness of a subject-object structure in our actual being does not of itself say anything about whether there is an eternal, atemporal self and an eternal, atemporal world, nor does it say anything about the nature of the subject and object as such.)

Is it possible to show, by this criterion, that a plurality of subject is equally fundamental? The test question is whether it is possible, without self-contradiction, to deny that the thinking of being (or the asking of the ontological question) implies a subject and another subject (just as it implies a subject and an object). The answer to the question may not at first seem obvious. But we can probably arrive at it by noticing that the very possibility of making the denial implies two different subjects--the one who affirms and the one who denies--and neither can be reduced to the other in the act itself. The one who affirms cannot, in the act of affirming, also deny. This result is, however, only preliminary; for, while it is true that there can be an act of denial as well as of affirmation, the very application of a criterion implies that one of the two statements

can be made only at the cost of self-contradiction, and this amounts to saying that the difference between the two subjects may be factual but not ontological. That is to say, there can be, in act, both denial and affirmation; but one of the two turns out to be false. Hence, the subject who makes the false assertion does not prove that plurality is ontological but only that it is factual or empirical. The structure of being would still be what it is without the attempts to make actual assertions that are false. This is, undoubtedly, the line of thought that is behind the notion of the universality of reason, and it is a reflection of what has recently come to be called the metaphysics of identity: not that everyone does in fact think the same way but that everyone is capable of learning to think correctly and that all those who think correctly will agree concerning which propositions are true and which false. Even if one did therefore find someone who would deny that if A is A, then A is not non-A, that would indicate not a plurality in reason but only that the rational capacity has not been developed in certain cases.

This does not, then, seem to constitute a proof of the plurality of subject in the ontological structure itself. At least that is true if, as is characteristic of the Western philosophical tradition, there is no ontological root for the false, the erroneous, the negative as such. The assumption that that is true may itself be questionable. But, instead of attacking

it, let us see whether there is not another way of showing the ontological root of subjective differentiation. If the first way was to point out that the very possibility of denying what has been asserted implies two different subjects, since one cannot actually both deny and affirm simultaneously, and if the result seemed ambiguous because the denial contains a self-contradiction, a second way is to ask how this denial contains a self-contradiction. If the one who denies that there is a plurality of subject can make the denial only at the cost of self-contradiction, that means he can make the denial only by implying that there is a difference between him and the other. Suppose, therefore, that I do assert: "Plurality (subject and other-subject) is not part of the ontological structure." Must I be, or be related to, another subject as I make that denial? Clearly, yes, if the denial is one actually made and if it makes any sense as a denial. (I'll admit that that is not quite so clear to me as the words "Clearly, yes" suggest.) That we can, in other words, contradict ourselves, or make a self-contradictory assertion, implies a principle of subjective differentiation. Any thinking about being, therefore, implies not only someone who does the thinking but also some other one who can think differently. In the extreme case of a tautology, "A is A," it is possible to think and to think differently about the identity of A with A. (A criticism made of the transition from being to nothing at the beginning of Hegel's logic was to the

effect that there is nothing in the concept of being which would set it in motion toward nothing. Rather, it is reflection that makes the transition possible. This seems to me, in essence, to amount to the contention that there is a plurality of subject--the affirmer, the denier--that accounts for the dialectical movement.)

If these considerations are correct, they amount to a demonstration that pluralism is rooted in the very structure of being. Similarly, it has theological roots if, like the thinking of being, the response drawn by the power of religious symbols implies both affirmative and negative responses. Is there a test for determining whether this is the case, as there is for determining whether an element is ontologically rooted? The answer here is similar: something belongs to the theological structure (by which, to repeat it, is meant the structure implied in making a free response to the power of a religious symbol) if it appears in every response. And just as there is no free response if there is not a responder and that to which response is made, there also is no response without the possibility of an opposite response.

The foregoing is a somewhat brief exposition of the roots of pluralism, but it may be sufficient to indicate that the differentiation in subjectivity is not something that can be eliminated, nor is it a phenomenon that can be explained only in evolutionary terms. Rather, it belongs to the finitude that is

articulated in the structure of being. If so, then the quest for unity must have an intention other than that of uniformity. It must recognize, in other words, the factor of standpoint and norms.

III. Norms and Criteria

That subjective differentiation is ontologically rooted has as one of its consequences that all thinking is done from a standpoint and that there is no "absolute" standpoint. The approach that Tillich took to this matter, in his "Idea of a Theology of Culture" (1919) and later in his System of Sciences According to Objects and Methods (1923),⁶ is one that seems to me especially fruitful and capable of uses beyond those that he himself made of it.

In his theology of culture, he was particularly concerned with the split in the modern world between religion and culture. He did not, however, see in that split itself a fundamental difference in standpoint; rather, the difference in standpoint comes into play in his proposal of a theology of culture. He begins by noting the difference between the empirical sciences and the systematic cultural sciences. In the empirical sciences standpoint is something that one tries to eliminate; in the systematic cultural sciences the standpoint of the thinker "belongs to the heart of the matter itself" (155). Thus, in the empirical sciences, when there are two contradictory views about

some reality, only one of them can be right, although both can be wrong. Whether, for example, the five books of Moses come from a single author or many authors is a question to which one answer is right and an opposite answer wrong. In systematic cultural sciences, it is not a matter of right and wrong because every system is also the expression of an attitude and different attitudes can be adopted toward reality with equal legitimacy. Thus, whether Protestant theology is right and Catholic theology wrong, or conversely, is an unanswerable question because the categories of right and wrong are not applicable to the difference between a Protestant and a Catholic attitude, or between what Tillich elsewhere calls the prophetic and the priestly. "There is," he explains, "a Gothic and a baroque style in aesthetics; a Catholic and a modern Protestant dogmatic theology; a romantic and a puritanical code of ethics; but in none of these pairs of alternatives is it possible simply to call one right and the other wrong" (156).⁷ The categories of judgment that are applicable here are those related to standpoints, not those related to neutrally observed reality; universal concepts of cultural ideas are so abstract as to be useless. Tillich summarizes by saying that every universal concept in cultural science "is either useless or a normative concept in disguise" (156). If it is a normative concept, then it is the result of a creative act in which the standpoint of the thinker is an ineradicable constituent element.

A standpoint, initially, is individual; for it is the individual thinker who makes the connection between an abstract universal and a concrete historical material. But if the connection which is made involves more than individual arbitrariness, it is a creative act; that is to say, it creates a connection between universal form and concrete content that can be seen not only by the individual but by the group from which the individual comes; that group, in turn, is surrounded by other cultural groups and is dependent upon creative acts of the past. It is in this way that the individual, concrete standpoint is connected with the "universal forms of spirit" (156). Hence, nonempirical cultural science embraces three forms: philosophy of culture, which is concerned with the universal forms; history of culture, which views the past concretizations of those forms; and the normative science of culture which gives a systematic expression to the concrete standpoint (157).

This notion of creative norm provides a way of dealing with the phenomenon of pluralism without incurring the dangers of thoroughgoing relativism. The concept that Tillich used to express this was the concept of "universal validity" in contrast with "universality." Despite their individuality, standpoints have universal significance, not through their being general truths inclusive of particular instances but through their transposability: the creative act through which they come into being is capable of being repeated by others in other contexts.

Standpoints as such are individual and have an unlimited variety. In that sense they cannot be judged to be right or wrong. The standpoint represented by Tillich's system is, as such, neither more right nor more wrong than the one represented in Karl Barth's or Karl Rahner's or Rudolf Bultmann's. The creativity in each of them, however, makes something new possible. Tillich's system makes it possible to see a unity between culture and religion that cannot be seen in Barth's or Rahner's or Heidegger's, though all of them work with the same historical materials--the philosophical and theological shaping of the Christian tradition accomplished by nineteenth-century idealism. To the extent that such a view of religio-cultural unity can also be adopted by others, it attains more than individual significance. In that sense it has a universal validity--others can come to adopt the same standpoint and, on its basis, create new syntheses. But it does not have universality, if universality means that it is the only true standpoint or that everyone both can and should adopt it or that it represents a generality that can be abstracted from the particulars of a tradition or of contemporary sciences.

Furthermore, there are no rules according to which the reach of a particular standpoint can be determined ahead of time. One could not, for example, set up rules according to which one might decide the number or kinds of people who can adopt the standpoint contained in Tillich's systematic view. Its power to create the

same possibility, the same standpoint, in others has to do with the extent of its creativity, not with its regularity or irregularity. Acts of creating norms are, thus, different from acts which find the general in the particular by abstraction. To see an object as a tree requires the capacity to abstract the form named by the word "tree" from the data perceived. To see matters from a standpoint requires the ability to recreate on one's own the synthesis of form and material in the norm.

Tillich's standpoint makes it possible to see how culture can be fully autonomous without losing its theonomous meaning, or how it can have both clarity of form and depth of meaning (Gehalt). It makes it possible to see how, for example, science and art can follow the laws of their own forms--their own "logic," as it were--without being subject to religious control, and how, by being thus autonomous, they can also give expression to their theonomous meaning. This is a view in which a fully secular culture is also the most religiously expressive. It is not a view that anyone has to take, but it is a view that one can take through the ability to reproduce the standpoint expressed in Tillich's system.

What does this conception of norm accomplish? First, it calls attention to the difference between universality (in the sense of generality) and universal validity (Allgemein-gültigkeit) and, correspondingly, to the difference between abstraction and creation, that is, between abstracting general

forms from particular material, on the one hand, and, on the other, creating syntheses of general principles with particular material. A systematic norm is not like an axiom, whose validity is formal and whose truth is to be intuited, nor is it like a general law, which is abstracted from concrete particulars and whose validity is also formal. Rather, a norm is created, not intuited or abstracted. Tillich probably owed his recognition of this character of norms to Nietzsche and to Troeltsch; for it was Nietzsche who had emphasized the creativity and risk involved in establishing norms and it was Troeltsch who had shown how norms are arrived at not by abstraction but through decisions that have to be made in concrete historical conflicts. (So, for example, the Protestant norm of justification through faith came into being as the result of a historical decision made in the conflict between the Reformers and the Medieval church; it was not the result of giving a philologically more tenable interpretation of biblical passages nor a principle arrived at by abstracting the essence of Christian theology from its manifold historical expressions.)

Second, it offers an account of how, in actual thinking or doing, the pluralistic aspect of being is expressed. The account differs from the idealist version of an evolution of human consciousness toward an absolute self-consciousness, a version which understands subjective differences as stages on the way toward a fully developed subjectivity (which, when fully developed, is at

one with objectivity). Whatever truth may lie in this evolutionary notion--and one would not wish to discount entirely the notion that there is an evolution of self-consciousness--it has the disadvantage of not understanding subjective differentiation to be equally original with subjective identity; in the end the absolute subject is an identical one. A critique of that identity is the point of such French philosophers as Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida.⁸ For that reason, an account in terms of the creativity of norms, such as Tillich gives in line with Nietzsche and Troeltsch, is more adequate if one concedes the ontological rooting of pluralism.

To recognize the creativity and individuality of norms is not the same as exempting them from any criteria. But the manner in which one tests systems based on originating norms is different from that in which one tests the validity or truth of axiomatic or general statements. (I use "axiomatic" to refer inclusively to such principles as "A is A" and "2+2=4" and "general" to refer to such laws as "F=ma [force is equivalent to mass times acceleration].") Some tests have been indicated in the course of the discussion, but we can draw them together here.

First, although every norm is initially the result of an individual creative act, there is a difference between creations which are limited to that individual and creations which, once brought into being, can be reduplicated by other individuals on their own. Hence, one test of norms is their communicability,

the extent to which they enable not only one individual but other persons as well to understand the empirical and historical material in the same way without thinking that the material is being forced into shapes into which it does not fit. One should perhaps add that this communicability applies to the individual person as well: a systematic view which might seem perfectly plausible and intelligible at a certain moment in life could later lose that plausibility for the same person. Its range, in those circumstances, is less than the range of a norm which continues to be able to shape material encountered in further thought and action.

Second, since a norm that is created also destroys other norms in the process, a test of norms is whether the creativity only destroys forms (including itself in the end) or replaces them with new forms that can take up the old ones. This criterion is related to what Tillich called "the demonic," by which he meant a creative power that shows its creativity only in a negative way, by creating new forms only for the purpose of destroying all forms, its own included. The examples that Tillich gives, in various places, of such demonic appearances may not seem to fit this definition very easily. In the 1920s, for example, he characterized intellectualism as an appearance of the demonic in the theoretical realm because its formalism resulted in an evacuation of meaning that provoked a reaction of irrationalism; similarly, in the practical realm, capitalism

ended in the loss of human community and provoked the reaction of nationalism. But, more closely viewed, these do fit the definition of the demonic because both intellectualism and capitalism are form-creating systems and because both of them, on this analysis, are destructive of the content from which forms live; they are so because, as "isms," they indicate that the creativity of the norm which gave rise to modern science and modern economy has been expended and their creativity can be salvaged only through the emergence of a new norm. The test of whether a norm is demonic does not seem to be easy to apply (if for no other reason than that, by the time the demonic character becomes clear, it is too late to do anything about it). Hence, it is a test that is related to the risk-taking involved in the creation of any norm. The risk is not that the normative creation will be incorrect when measured by some standard but rather that it will be demonic. Even so, this is an applicable test.

It is in the context of this second criterion that one can understand the intention of Tillich's theology of culture. Modern culture and traditional (ecclesiastical) religion tended toward the demonic: culture, because its autonomous forms lost depth; and ecclesiastical religion, because, tied to cultural forms now dead, it could not show the deep meaning of contemporary culture. A theology of culture takes the risk of establishing a normative view of contemporary culture in which

autonomy of cultural form and theonomy of depth-content are both expressed.

Third, a system, and the norm on which it is based, can be tested by the criterion of whether it incorporates an opening to what is beyond it, a principle of recognition of the otherness of the other or, put differently, a principle of self-transcendence. Tillich first expressed this in a systematic sketch from the year 1913 in the form of a paradox: the one systematic absolute is that no system is absolute.⁹ Hence, even a theological system which is presented from an absolute standpoint terminates in the paradox that this concrete expression of an absolute standpoint is not absolute. A system of the absolute may be complete in the sense of being an organized whole, or of having a center with articulated members, but it cannot be complete in the sense of being closed off from other systems or finished within itself. As Tillich put it in The Dynamics of Faith, the one absolute truth is that no one possesses the absolute truth.¹⁰ This is the systematic criterion that Tillich also finds in the religious symbol of the cross; for the cross is the symbol which expresses the relativity of all symbols and which, within Christianity, is a principle of the transcendence of the Christian religion. Put in phraseology somewhat different from Tillich's, the religious symbol of the cross is the second-order symbol which symbolizes the symbolic character of all symbols. It is a symbolic expression of the second-order normative statement about normative systems--that every system is open.

As a normative statement about norms, this paradoxical formulation, too, is the result of a creative act. Like other norms, it elicits agreement to the extent that others are able to reproduce the creative act contained in it. No such interpretation of the symbol of the cross can be had by finding a common meaning in all the particular Christian theologians. Furthermore, like other creative acts, it too runs the risk of expressing a creativity that in the end is destructive. One symptom of such a risk is the way in which anyone concerned with rational clarity is made immediately suspicious by references to paradox and by such formulations as the statement that the only absolute truth is that no one possesses the absolute truth (which can elicit the question, "Do we then possess that absolute truth?"). The unique aspect of this paradoxically stated norm, however, is that, because it can perpetually transcend itself, it is in a sense beyond the risk contained in other norms; it is the element of perpetual creativity. Tillich spelled this out most clearly in connection with the symbol of the cross in relation to the figure of Jesus as the Christ (a figure in which a historical person elicits a response to God, an ultimate concern) by saying that Jesus sacrifices himself as Jesus to himself as Christ; this is the way in which his person becomes the transparency of the divine. (Transparency is to be understood here not by contrast with translucence but as exhibited in stained-glass windows or Christmas transparencies--in which the light shining through

simultaneously illuminates the colored figures so that the figures appear in themselves on their own just to the extent that light shines through them.) For while the identification of Jesus as the Christ contains a risk--one has no way of knowing how many people will respond to that figure in this way or how long any given person will so respond to it--it also contains an element beyond that risk because it anticipates the possibility of its not creating a response to itself.

IV. Some Conclusions

The notion of normative systems may provide some guidelines for understanding, if not for overcoming, some of the disunities that today tend to tear apart the elements that make for intelligibility and community. For it seems to mean the following:

First, with regard to the split between science and philosophy, it provides a way, besides that of hermeneutics, for working toward a common understanding of basic concepts. We are aware, for example, of how the concept of "cause" as used in modern science became separated from its root meaning so that the connection between cause and responsibility, which was present in the Greek and Latin metaphysical uses of the concept, was severed; cause came to mean only mechanical causation, and understanding things by references to causes came to mean only understanding them by reference to mechanical causes. Something similar happened to other concepts like "substance" (in which,

even in English, the etymological connection with "understanding" was lost to view). Furthermore, even nonscientists among us are aware that the concept of cause in biological science is becoming different from the same concept in physics and that, even within physics, the peculiarities of quantum mechanical causal connections seem to indicate yet another concept of cause. The result is that the increasing specialization of sciences is not restricted to the material that is studied but to the very concepts with which it is studied, and communication across boundaries of specializations becomes increasingly difficult. Is there a way of reversing the process of isolation without imposing upon the particular sciences an inadequate formalization or a heteronomous ideology?

One answer to that question comes by way of the contemporary hermeneutical discussion, whose father is either Heidegger or Wittgenstein and whose grandfather is Schleiermacher. This discussion proposes to trace the specialized, objectifying uses of basic concepts back to their primary original sense (the word "substance," for example, to the act of "understanding" and "accident" to the act of "falling") in order to reconstruct the process by which that original sense leads to the derivative specialized senses. For such an endeavor, common language is the point of reference and the medium of community. That work is still, as it were, in its infancy, but it appears to be having some results at least to the extent of providing an appeal to

groups of people in several different and otherwise isolated special communities of discourse (literary scholars, philosophers, theologians, physicists, biologists).

A second approach, however, represented by Tillich's thought, has recourse not to hermeneutics but to systematic construction. Thus, Tillich in 1923 published his System of Sciences According to Objects and Methods in which the unity and diversity of the sciences--among them, mathematics, logic, physics, biology, history, law, ethics, metaphysics, and theology--are worked out through a procedure that can be described as an ontological analysis in the framework of a normative system. Tillich admitted the limitations of his own effort: while he thought himself reasonably well-informed about the humanities (the Geisteswissenschaften), he also considered his material knowledge of the natural sciences to be inadequate for anything more than a rather highly formalized sketch. Even so, such a system of sciences offers a second way of seeing the unity in the diversity, a way that is, perhaps, more difficult than the hermeneutical one because it cannot go at the task piecemeal but must try to present the system as a whole.

If the independence of the empirical sciences from philosophy is one of the disunities today, a second is the split among the several philosophies. In the nature of the case, a system of sciences which is not merely formal but normative cannot do much to overcome the isolation of philosophies from each other, if for

no other reason than that each philosophy could produce its own system in which the other philosophies are incorporated in typological or other ways. But what can provide some unity in the midst of the disunities is the recognition of the creative and individual character of norms, or the recognition of the standpoint that is represented in philosophical systems.

The third disunity--between philosophy and religion, or between cultural forms and religious symbols--is the one that is most directly concerned in Tillich's efforts to formulate a theology of culture which would make the unity of culture at a given time visible by the way in which what he called the "predominant import (Gehalt: depth, or realness)" of a culture is expressed in the various spheres: works of art, works of literature, politics and statecraft, and the like. It is a task which can be done only by reference to the material fulness of the culture and by actual analyses of its works. Such a theology of culture shows its unity not through its common forms (as a system of sciences might do) but by reference to the identity of the Gehalt which makes itself known analogously in the spheres of culture.

A final disunity is the difference and sometimes conflict among the religions. Partly this is a split between classical and modern forms of the same tradition, with fundamentalism (the attempt to preserve religion in the same cultural forms in which it was first expressed) and secularism (the effort to replace

religion with culture itself) representing the extreme possibilities. Partly it is, second, a split between different religious traditions. Whether there is any way of resolving the conflict between fundamentalism and secularism is not clear. One suspects there is none and that, therefore, the conflict between them will go on, but if it can be contained within a larger unity, its destructive consequences can be avoided. The differences among the religions is another matter. Here, as it seems to me, Tillich's conception of the paradox that keeps systems open and, within the Christian religion, of the paradoxical character of the symbol of the cross provides the possibility of a much more even-sided dialogue between religions than is otherwise possible for a monotheistic religion; for it makes room for recognition of a radical otherness within the human community without losing the sense of religious absoluteness that characterizes monotheistic religion. Conversation among the world's religions is itself a comparatively recent phenomenon, dating not much earlier than the nineteenth century;¹¹ the recognition of such a religious symbol provides both a motivation for and an openness in such conversations.

NOTES

¹This is one of the points, e.g., in Schelling's discussion of dogmatism and criticism: F.W.J. Schelling, "Philosophische Briefe über Dogmatismus und Kriticismus," Ausgewählte Werke, vol. I (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967), pp. 161-221.

²Part 4 of "What Is Man?" in Between Man and Man, tr. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), pp. 199-208.

³See, e.g., Die Absolutheit des Christentums und die Religionsgeschichte (Tübingen and Leipzig: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1902), and "The Place of Christianity Among the World Religions" in his Christian Thought: Its History and Application (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), pp. 35-63.

⁴I shall refer only briefly here to the theological basis, since I have presented what I have to say on that elsewhere, in "Pluralism in Theology," Journal of Ecumenical Studies 5:676-96.

⁵This is an application of a dialectical method that goes back to Aristotle. For its context there, see Richard McKeon, "Truth and the History of Ideas," in his Thought, Action, and Passion (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), p. 62.

⁶"The Idea of a Theology of Culture," in What Is Religion? ed. James L. Adams (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), pp. 155-81; The System of the Sciences according to Objects and Methods, tr. Paul Wiebe (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1981).

7The issue of right and wrong may appear, e.g., when moral codes are put into statutory or constitutional law. But then the debate should have to do not with which code is right but with whether law ought to embody only one of the different codes.

⁸Emmanuel Levinas, Autrement qu'etre ou au-dela de l'essence (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974); Engl. translation by Alphonso Lingis, Otherwise than Being (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981). Jacques Derrida, Writing and Difference, tr. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

⁹"Systematische Theologie," in John Clayton, The Concept of Correlation (New York and Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), pp. 253-68.

¹⁰"[The criterion] does not accept any truth of faith as ultimate except the one that no man possesses it," Dynamics of Faith (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), p. 98.

¹¹For documentation, see various essays in Heinrich Fries et al., Kirche und Religionen--Begegnung und Dialog, 2 vols. (St. Ottilien: EDS Verlag, 1981-82).