

Reinhold Bernhardt

## Chapter 11

“One can distinguish two ways of approaching God: the way of overcoming estrangement and the way of meeting a stranger.” Paul Tillich’s Engagement with Buddhism

### 1 Two Ways

“One can distinguish two ways of approaching God: the way of overcoming estrangement and the way of meeting a stranger.” This is how Paul Tillich begins his essay “The Two Types of Philosophy of Religion”, published in 1946.<sup>1</sup> It refers to an earlier article, “Estrangement and Reconciliation in Modern Thought.”<sup>2</sup> There, he unpacks the difference between the two ways. They stand for two types of thinking about God, for two methods philosophers and theologians used and use to try to attain “knowledge” or – as he prefers to say – “awareness” of God. Let us take a closer look at these two ways. I will start with the second way: The way of meeting God as a stranger.

Tillich characterizes this way as follows: “I approach God as one ‘unknown’ who happens to come in my orbit. I make statements about him in terms of doubt and possibility and perhaps probability. I am at first suspicious, then friendly towards him, and may even become his friend. And he, as the more powerful and more perfect one, may give me support, direction and mercy; he may reveal himself to me within the limits of our remaining alienation. But all this is accidental for both of us.”<sup>3</sup>

This slightly ironical description implies a critique of theism. God is portrayed like a human being who appears “in my orbit”. He comes from an outer world, reveals himself in the cosmic reality or in his external word. Meeting God as a “stranger” means not standing in an *essential* relationship to him. God is regarded as an *external* being who has to be approached not at the centre of the human self, but by a kind of “externalizing” of the subject. Thus meeting God as a stranger leads to self-estrangement.

---

1 Paul Tillich, “The Two Types of Philosophy of Religion (1946),” in Paul Tillich, *Ausgewählte Texte*, ed. Christian Danz, Werner Schüßler and Erdmann. Sturm (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), 289–300, 289.

2 Paul Tillich, “Estrangement and Reconciliation in Modern Thought (1944),” in MW VI, 255–272.

3 Tillich, “Estrangement,” 258.

Interestingly, Tillich would have to classify both Barth's theology of the Word of God and so-called natural theology as approaches which follow the second way. He does not refer explicitly to those theological movements but he may have been conscious of them when writing the essay. He also may have been conscious of Barth's distinction between the "dogmatic", the "critical" and the "dialectical" way of understanding and proclaiming the gospel from Barth's famous article, "Das Wort Gottes als Aufgabe der Theologie."<sup>4</sup>

Tillich says that if God is met as a stranger he is only encountered by chance before slipping away again. That way of achieving knowledge of God does not lead to certainty – only probabilities.

Thus Tillich prefers the first way of approaching God: the way of overcoming estrangement. For this way,

man meets himself and not a stranger. But in himself he meets something which is more himself than *he* is and which, at the same time, infinitely transcends himself. What he meets is so to speak the *prius* of himself, and consequently it is present even in the most radical self-estrangement and enmity against oneself and God. The basic certainty cannot be lost.<sup>5</sup>

Human life always stands in the tension between existence (factual life) and essence (the actual destination of life). These are the "main qualities" of human life. Tillich denotes the difference between existence and essence as self-alienation. In this kind of estrangement, subject and object are not two different persons but one and the same person. The person is alienated from him- or herself, that is to say from the essence of his or her being. But because "essence" means being rooted in the ground of being, self-alienation also is alienation from God, who is beyond the difference of essence and existence.<sup>6</sup> Metaphorically speaking, essence is the original image (*imago dei*) of the human being: the human being as it was and is intended by God. When humans discover themselves as estranged from their original image, they recognize God as the original ground and ultimate point of reference of this original image. Thus overcoming estrangement is a way of approaching God. In centring my being in being-itself, I overcome estrangement and discover God.

---

<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth, "Das Wort Gottes als Aufgabe der Theologie," in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1922–1925, Gesamtausgabe III, vol. 19* (Zurich: Theologische Verlag, 1990), 144–175. It would be interesting to compare Tillich's twofold scheme with Barth's distinction of three ways, but that would exceed the scope of this article.

<sup>5</sup> Tillich, "Estrangement," 258.

<sup>6</sup> ST II, 205.

This is a discovery of unity and difference, simultaneously. The human being discovers his true being as “something that is identical with himself, although it transcends him infinitely.”<sup>7</sup> And in this true self the *ground* of being is disclosed to him, *being-itself* and the *power* of being.

We find a similar connection between self-knowledge and God-knowledge in the first lines of Calvin’s *Institutes*:

Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other.<sup>8</sup>

According to Tillich, this is the first way to God: The way of realizing one’s *essential* relationship to God by way of realizing one’s self-estrangement from the essence of being: God not as a being besides me, but as the essential ground of existence.

In the essay “The Two Types of Philosophy of Religion” he further elaborates on this distinction. Using the two ways as symbols for two types of philosophy of religion, the ontological and the cosmological, he proposes that the ontological method should be given priority.

“The ontological principle in philosophy of religion may be stated in the following way: Man is immediately aware of something unconditional which is the prius of the separation and interaction of subject and object, theoretically as well as practically.”<sup>9</sup> The *immediate awareness* of the Unconditioned is the core of the ontological method. It is impossible to become aware of it as an observer who stands over against it. One only can become aware of it by realizing that one already is conditioned by it in one’s whole being. It is only possible to become conscious of God as the ground of being by means of existential involvement, and not through recognizing within the scheme of the separation of subject and object.

Tillich refers to Augustine as the theological authority who has laid the foundation for the ontological method, assuming that the religious absolute is presupposed in every philosophical question, including the question of God: “God is the presupposition of the question of God.”<sup>10</sup> The affinity between Tillich

---

<sup>7</sup> Tillich, “The Two Types,” 289.

<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2002), <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.html>, I,1,1

<sup>9</sup> Tillich, “The Two Types,” 296. (the second part of the quotation is printed in italics).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

and Calvin in this respect – which I mentioned just before – should not surprise us, because Calvin is also deeply rooted in Augustine’s theology.

The cosmological type, on the other hand, relies on the perception of the senses and abstraction from perceived experiences. It leads to knowledge about reality but does not lead to an awareness of the *principles* of reality and truth. It leads to a *mediated* knowledge of God by means of empirical experience, rational reasoning and reference to authorities. The cosmological type shows reality in the created light of perception, rationality and belief, but it does not allow one to see the uncreated light – the source of light – itself. And that is what Tillich wants to see.

What does the distinction of the two ways of approaching God have to do with Tillich’s encounter with Buddhism? I am convinced that one can find the intellectual seeds for his interest in that encounter on the one hand in his understanding of the ontological model, and on the other hand in the provocation of that model by the Buddhist way of thinking about the Absolute. He strives to see not only *in* the light, but the light itself. And that was what Buddhism promised to achieve in its own way. Thus the essay on the two types of philosophy of religion – even if written years before Tillich got interested in an encounter with the Eastern Religions, in particular Buddhism – can be understood as a signpost that points to the opening for that encounter. However, when he engaged in the dialogue with Japanese Buddhism he discovered that the first way of approaching God – the way of overcoming estrangement by participating in being-itself – is challenged by a philosophy that in certain ways critically questions his concept of “being-itself,” in that it regards ultimate reality not as the ground of being but as absolute nothingness.

One can say that the second way of approaching God – the way of meeting a stranger – received a second meaning. Tillich wanted to go beyond theological provincialism, the focus on the occidental tradition of theology and philosophy.<sup>11</sup> He wanted to overcome the mainly apologetic attitude of Christian theology towards other religions and enter into a “creative dialogue,” which provokes and inspires one’s own way of thinking and facilitates constructive transformations.

---

<sup>11</sup> Paul Tillich, “On the Boundary Line,” *Christian Century* (December 7, 1960): 1435–1437, quotation 1435, in extracts reprinted in *The Essential Tillich. An Anthology of the Writings of Paul Tillich*, ed. F. Forrester Church (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987): 209–213, 210.

## 2 Tillich's Encounter with Buddhism

In autumn 1957 Tillich engaged the Japanese Zen Master Hisamatsu Shin'ichi in three discussions at Harvard University that deeply influenced him. He was particularly impressed by Hisamatsu as a person.<sup>12</sup> Reflecting on these encounters he said in April 1958 that “if you meet a person who really has the qualities of a saint, which this man has, then the simple reality of this being gives you more insight into the nature of that for which he lives than any external knowledge.”<sup>13</sup> This encounter thus can be related in a certain way to both ways of attaining knowledge: the way of acquiring “external knowledge” and the way of becoming aware of the essence of being, through exposing oneself to the ground of the own existence (“the simple reality of this being gives ... insight into the nature of that for which he lives”).

Tillich had already encountered Buddhism at the beginning of the 1950's. The psychoanalyst Karen Horney established the contact between Tillich and Daisetsu T. Suzuki. Tillich was teaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York when Suzuki was appointed to teach at Columbia University. It is not possible to say exactly when the two met. Suzuki was not an ordained Zen teacher and represented a western orientated form of Buddhism which was in part regarded as unorthodox. Heidegger is said to have stated after his study of Suzuki's work that “if I understand this man correctly, this is what I have been trying to say in all my writings.”<sup>14</sup>

However, the basis for Tillich's openness to the spiritual world of Buddhism does not lie in the more or less chance meeting with Suzuki. It lies in Tillich's search for existential forms of meaning (“*Sinnformen*”) during the crisis of meaning (“*Sinnkrise*”) after the Second World War. This search for new patterns of

---

**12** Documented in: *The Eastern Buddhist* 4 (1971), 89–107; 5 (1972) 107–128; 6 (1973) 87–114; reprinted in: Paul Tillich, *The Encounter of Religions and Quasi-Religions*, ed. by T. Thomas (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 75–170. See also Carl Olson, “Tillich's Dialogue with Buddhism,” *Buddhist-Christian-Studies* 7 (1987): 183–195; Langdon Gilkey, “Tillich and the Kyoto School,” in *Papers from the Annual Meeting of the North American Paul Tillich Society*, Boston, Massachusetts, December 1987 (Charlottesville, VA: North American Paul Tillich Society, 1987), 1–10, reprinted in Robert P. Scharlemann, ed., *Negation and Theology* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 72–85; Werner Schüßler and Erdmann Sturm, *Paul Tillich. Leben – Werk – Wirkung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2007), 150–162 (especially 158–163), and 244–246.

**13** Paul Tillich, “The Protestant Principle and the Encounter of World Religions,” reprinted in Tillich, *The Encounter*, 1-56; 28.

**14** *Zen Buddhism, Selected writings by Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki*, ed. William Barrett (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1956), xi-xii.

meaning led him through engagement with existential philosophy, psychoanalysis and contemporary literature to an interest in Buddhism. While the experience of meaninglessness was discerned and analysed in the streams of western culture referred to above in order to *overcome* it, in Zen Buddhist thinking he found a fascinating alternative to this. Here, the extinguishing of the self in emptiness was envisaged as the *goal* of the spiritual path. One can say that in existential philosophy, the experience of the void or emptiness was regarded as the “question” in the sense of the method of correlation. In Buddhism, this experience was the “answer”.

Tillich’s deeply influential encounter with Zen Buddhism first took place in 1957. As mentioned before, in the Autumn of that year he had engaged in three discussions with Hisamatsu Shin’ichi. In 1958 he gave the lecture “The Protestant Principle and the Encounter of the World Religions.”<sup>15</sup> The most significant experience, however, was his journey to Japan from 1<sup>st</sup> of May to the 10<sup>th</sup> July 1960. The insights he gained there flowed into his lecture “Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions,” given in New York in autumn 1961.<sup>16</sup> Until his death in 1965 he engaged intensively with this theme.<sup>17</sup>

Through this openness to Zen Buddhist thinking, a transformation of Tillich’s theological thinking occurred. Reflecting on this, he said “(I) felt an immense enrichment of substance ever since my trip”.<sup>18</sup> The word substance in this case “means more than new insights and certainly more than a better knowledge of another section of the world. It means being somehow transformed through participation.”<sup>19</sup> This transformation – as far as one can reconstruct it – consisted not so much in specific new insights as in a broadening of the horizons of his thinking. Not so much *what* is thought, but the *thinking* as such has changed, not so much the content as the framework. Tillich described this as a “volcanic experience.”<sup>20</sup>

One can easily appreciate why Tillich was so fascinated by the Zen Buddhist cultural world and spirituality. Above all it was the paradox of an “ontology of

---

**15** Paul Tillich, “The Protestant Principle and the Encounter of the World Religions,” in *The Encounter*, 1–56.

**16** Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (New York / London: Columbia University Press, 1963), reprinted in: MW V, 291–325.

**17** Paul Tillich, “The Significance of the History of Religions for the Systematic Theologian,” in *The Future of Religions*, ed. Jerald C. Brauer (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 80–94.

**18** Tillich, “On the Boundary Line”.

**19** *Ibid.*

**20** Wilhelm Pauck and Marion Pauck, *Paul Tillich: His Life and Thought*, Vol. I: *Life* (London: Collins, 1977), 260.

nothingness”, already mentioned, that he encountered there. According to the Kyoto School of Zen Buddhism as it was expounded by Keiji Nishitani, (who wrote his dissertation thesis on Schelling and Bergson, studied Heidegger intensively, and had been teaching philosophy at Kyoto since 1943), the “field of *sūnyatā* (emptiness)” is the ultimate ground of being and of nothingness, of the self and the not-self. The “standpoint of emptiness” opens up “an absolutely non-objective knowing of the absolutely non-objective self in itself.”<sup>21</sup> This was exactly what Tillich was looking for. Nishitani, however, went further and claimed that the *self* is not the gate to the ground of being. Rather, the self has to be transcended:

The standpoints of conscious and discursive (discerning) intellect and intuitive intellect are broken. The standpoints of the subject that knows things objectively, and likewise knows itself objectively as a thing called the self, is broken down. This not-knowing is the self as an absolutely non-objective selfness, and the self-awareness that comes about at the point of that not-knowing comes down to a ‘knowing of the non-knowing’. This self-awareness, in contrast with what is usually taken as the self’s knowing of itself, is not a ‘knowing’ that consists in the self’s turning to itself and refracting into itself. It is not ‘reflective’ knowing. What is more, the intuitive knowledge or intellectual intuition that are ordinarily set up in opposition to reflective knowledge leave in their wake a duality of seer and seen, and to that extent still show traces of ‘reflection.’<sup>22</sup>

An epistemology like that must have been a stimulating provocation for Tillich. It took “the way of overcoming estrangement” beyond the point which Tillich focused on: the self ought not to reflect on its ground which is the ground of being. Rather, the self has to leave itself behind in order to enter into a ground which is not being itself but absolute nothingness.

The discussion with Hisamatsu focused on the place beyond the division between subject and object, beyond that division in which objective recognition takes place. It is a placeless place, an extensionless point that Tillich had described with the concept of “absolute faith.” “Absolute faith” has no particular content, it consists of a pure being taken hold of by the divine power of being in a pure “state of being” (“*Zuständlichkeit*”; that means: being without any action, perhaps one can understand it also as pure relationality). “Absolute faith ... is without the safety of words and concepts, it is without a name, a church, a cult, a theology. But it is moving in the depth of all of them. It is the power of being, in which they participate and of which they are fragmentary expres-

---

<sup>21</sup> Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 154 f.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

sions.”<sup>23</sup> “Absolute faith” does not refer to a religious fulfilment of the human person but rather to an awareness of the presence of the power of being, whose power preceded any awareness of it.

According to Tillich, the symbol of the cross poignantly brings the presence of the “absent God” to expression. In his cry of God-forsakenness Jesus turns to God, “who remained his God after the God of confidence had left him in the darkness of doubt and meaninglessness.”<sup>24</sup> It is no longer about the *content* of faith but the pure presence of God.

Faith is realized only in a particular concrete content (symbolizations). But this content may not be absolutized, otherwise the content of faith *closes* rather than *opens* the way of becoming aware of the ground of being. Tillich found that Zen Buddhism gives central significance to this impulse to transcend all religious content and forms of appearance. What is described in Zen Buddhism as the liberation from all attachment to religious concepts is encountered in an analogous form in Tillich’s theological (more precisely, prophetic) critique of religion.

Masao Abe, who accompanied Tillich as translator on his journey to Japan, sets the central Mahāyāna Buddhist concept of *śūnyatā* (emptiness) in relationship to Tillich’s critique of religion as he (Tillich) summarized it in the so called “Protestant principle”.<sup>25</sup> Tillich sets this principle against every form of the self-absolutization of religion which he labels as the “demonization” of religious phenomena. This critique also affects conceptions of God, which ought not to become absolutized. Again and again Tillich admonishes one to transcend *theistic* perceptions of the absolute in particular. In Buddhism he encountered a non-theistic religion that also highly valued the self-critique of all religious forms and perspectives.

In the teaching of Buddha this is expressed in the parable of the raft:

A man traveling along a path came to a great expanse of water. As he stood on the shore, he realized there were dangers and discomforts all about. But the other shore appeared safe and inviting. The man looked for a boat or a bridge and found neither. But with great effort he gathered grass, twigs and branches and tied them all together to make a simple raft. Relying on the raft to keep himself afloat, the man paddled with his hands and feet and reached the safety of the other shore. He could continue his journey on dry land. Now, what would he do with his makeshift raft? Would he drag it along with him or leave it be-

---

<sup>23</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 189, reprinted in MW V, 141–230; 229.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 188; MW V, 228.

<sup>25</sup> Masao Abe, “Review of Tillich’s “Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions,” *The Eastern Buddhist* 1 (1965): 109–122.

hind? He would leave it, the Buddha said. Then the Buddha explained that the dharma is like a raft. It is useful for crossing over but not for holding onto...<sup>26</sup>

The teachings, doctrines and instructions of the religions are like that raft. One can make use of them to cross the river, but then has to leave them behind, to transcend them. Here as there – in Christianity as in Buddhism – as in all authentic religion Tillich finds the impulse to distinguish the symbolic forms of the religion from the level of meaning to which the symbol points, between the “sense” and the “meaning” of the symbol, the signifier and the signified. He calls on the religions to understand their symbol-systems as being transparent to the absolute at which they hint and thus not to deify them, that means to give absolute validity to them. In this way, Tillich identifies within Buddhism the element he calls the “prophetic.” He applies his typology of the three or four fundamental dimensions of experiencing and contextualizing the Holy – the sacramental, the prophetic, the mystical and the ethical – to Buddhism. These elements are present in all religions even when they take on different forms.

Hisamatsu named the Absolute the “Formless Self” – the overcoming of all forms and all shapes that being and the self have taken on; so that in a certain manner they are stripped of all their symbolizations and pure being and the pure self remain. Everything that is concrete and particular, all forms of being, forms of perception, all forms of thought must be stripped away to arrive at the formless self. But this path – according to his understanding – does not lead away from the finite beings to a *transcendent* being; rather it leads to the *ground* of all being which is nothingness.

The Absolute does not stand over against being and the human self, it rather is their being and their presence. It is not a reality for its own sake. In a certain way it can be understood as the “thing in itself” but this must not be thought of as something substantial beyond the thing. Hisamatsu illustrates the “Formless Self” through the distinction between two perspectives: the conscious observation where the subject stands over against the object in the division of subject and object and the pure seeing through which the observer and the observed become one. In the first perspective the objects that stand *in* the light are seen. In the second perspective an enlightenment occurs through the light itself: a “pure seeing.” To achieve this “*Lichtung*” – getting enlightened –, to reach this state of non-duality in subjectless and objectless concentration is the goal of Zen meditation. And as we heard before, this pure seeing – not seeing something *in* the

---

<sup>26</sup> Quoted from <http://buddhism.about.com/od/sacredbuddhisttexts/fl/The-Buddhas-Raft-Parable.htm>

light but seeing the light – was what Tillich strived for. It comes close to the ontological method of philosophy of religion, but transcends it.

### 3 Distinctions

Tillich encountered Buddhist spirituality and reflected philosophically upon it fully aware of its fundamental distinction from Christian spirituality and theology. At no point does he equate them.<sup>27</sup> He does not seek a common foundation for determining the relationship with Buddhist thinking. Rather he focuses on the characteristic peculiarities. I would like to note four points that describe significant distinctions that stand between Tillich and Hisamatsu. The first point relates to the transcendence of the Absolute, the second to the relationship between the Absolute and the human self, the third to the forms and shapes in which the Absolute appears in being and the fourth to the understanding of nothingness or emptiness.

#### 3.1 The transcendence of the Absolute

According to Tillich the divine ground of being is present in a dialectic of immanence and transcendence. It remains the Wholly Other while in the presence of its Spirit it is present in the reality of the world. According to the Zen Buddhist opinion the Absolute is not to be seen *as a transcendent reality* which constitutes being and the self and stands in an essential relationship to them. Rather, the Absolute is deeply *immanent*.<sup>28</sup> It is not a centre of activity which discloses or reveals itself, but a (rather, the basic) dimension in all human and non-human being, which can be discovered by becoming aware of it. While according to Tillich God is beyond essence and existence, according to Hisamatsu the Absolute is the essence of existence and being. It is the formlessness of existence and being. The Absolute is the immediate presence of being and the self. The “field of emptiness” – according to Nishitani – is the “absolute near side.”<sup>29</sup> “It opens up ... still closer to us than what we ordinarily think of as ourselves. In other words,

---

<sup>27</sup> See in this regard the brilliant study of Stefan S. Jäger, *Glaube und religiöse Rede bei Tillich und im Shin-Buddhismus. Eine religionshermeneutische Studie*. Tillich Research 2 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011).

<sup>28</sup> Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, especially chapter 4, 119–167. See also Gilkey, “Tillich and the Kyoto School,” 72–85.

<sup>29</sup> Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 151.

by turning from what we ordinarily call 'self' to the field of *sūnyatā*, we become truly ourselves."<sup>30</sup>

If one relates this Buddhist understanding of the Absolute back to Tillich's two different ways of philosophy of religion it seems that according to the Buddhist understanding, both ways run like asymptotic lines toward the groundless ground of being and nothingness. Not only the way of reflecting on the essential ground of human existence but also the way of discovering the essence of non-human entities in the "outer world" can lead to an awareness of the Absolute. The Absolute is not to be discovered there as a stranger, but as the innermost principle of all being, human and non-human. Accordingly there is no sphere of the stranger. Awareness of the Absolute can be attained just as well in the reality of the world as in the existential constitution of the human being. Both can disclose the inner mystery of being. Thus it is not necessary to integrate the cosmological with the ontological way as Tillich recommends.

### 3.2 The relationship between the Absolute and the human self

Hisamatsu discovers the ground of being *in* beings; his starting point is an ultimate *identity*. Tillich's starting point on the other hand is a *relationship* between God and the human being. This relationship is made possible by a God-given participation in the power of being. After his journey to Japan, Tillich summarized:

"The discussions with Buddhists have shown me that their main points of difference with Christianity are always: the different valuation placed on the individual, the meaning of history, interpersonal relations, religious and social reformation, and finitude and guilt. It is the contrast between the principle of identity and the principle of participation."<sup>31</sup>

Hisamatsu's principle of identity stands in contrast to Tillich's polarity of identification and participation. It cannot be resolved into a total identification of the human self (and the worldly being in general) with divine being itself. The reason for this lies on the one hand in the infinite qualitative difference between God and humanity. On the other hand, it lies in the brokenness of the existential human constitution, that is, in the alienation of human beings from the essence of being – in traditional language, in the sinfulness of human nature. Only in

---

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Tillich, *Christianity*, 99.

Jesus Christ is the true essential being manifested under the conditions of existence without being overwhelmed by them.<sup>32</sup>

The difference between the Christian determination of the relationship between God and humanity through the principle of participation and the Buddhist striving after the extinguishing of the person through which it becomes identical with the emptiness as ultimate reality, is reflected according to Tillich in the central symbols of both religions. The “kingdom of God” places the ontological principle of participation in the foreground and “nirvana” places the principle of identity in the foreground. Both, however, include the other principle. This is the reason why they do not exclude each other mutually in the last instance.<sup>33</sup>

### 3.3 The forms and shapes in which the Absolute appears in being

For Hisamatsu, every shape must be exceeded, every form must be left, and one must break through to formlessness. According to Tillich, in contrast, the ground of being is always manifested in symbolic forms. There is no formlessness, rather there is only the dialectic of taking shape and transcending that shape, of symbolization and protest against the absolutizing of the symbols. The Absolute only gives knowledge of itself through self-mediation in the power of its Spirit. This applies to both ways of approaching God and of philosophy of religion: not only to the cosmological way but also to the ontological way. One needs a kind of divine enlightenment to become aware of the essence at the ground of one’s own existence. On the one hand one may not identify the means of mediation with the Absolute itself. On the other hand one cannot remove the symbolic forms in order to break through to what Hisamatsu describes as “pure being.” The “new being” must in a certain way come to and grasp the human person from beyond. “Beyond” does not mean as a stranger, but in terms of immanent transcendence.

For Tillich under the condition of existential alienation one can grasp the essence of existence and being only in a *fragmentary* way. The “pure seeing” corresponds to the eschatological vision that human persons, in the brokenness of their existence, are not able to realize. The difference between present faith and

---

<sup>32</sup> ST II, 94.

<sup>33</sup> Tillich. *Christianity*, III/4. See Pan-Chiu Lai, “Kingdom of God in Tillich and Pure Land in Mahayana Buddhism,” in *Internationales Jahrbuch für die Tillich-Forschung / International Yearbook for Tillich-Research 5/2009: Religionstheologie und interreligiöser Dialog*, eds. Christian Danz, Werner Schüßler and Erdmann Sturm (Münster: Lit, 2010), 151–172.

the eschatological vision cannot be resolved, even if the entire striving of the Zen Buddhist way to knowledge is to overcome it in the here and now.<sup>34</sup>

### 3.4 The understanding of nothingness or emptiness

Hisamatsu illustrates the difference between the Christian and the Buddhist understanding with Meister Eckhart's discussion of the "holy abyss." Eckhart does not use this to portray emptiness as the goal of the spiritual path. Overcoming emptiness by becoming "filled" with God's grace is the goal. Even in Tillich's religious interpretation of "emptiness," which he developed after the Second World War, emptiness is neither the starting point nor the goal but the *transit stage* in the search for meaning. Emptiness is for Tillich a spiritual vacuum in which the human strives for fulfilment and as such it becomes the condition of the possibility of this fulfilment. It is a condition of waiting and longing, a not-yet, in a certain way an Advent time, that goes to meet the coming of the new being.<sup>35</sup> Hence emptiness still stands for a creative *deficit* of meaning, for the *hidden* presence of God. To this extent and only to this extent is it a holy emptiness.<sup>36</sup> Nothingness according to Tillich stands over against being as the negative condition that lacks any power of being. It is that which destroys being, whereas for *Hisamatsu* it is the liberation from any attachment to being and so leads into the field of the emptiness. According to Tillich being has priority over non-being and encloses it, while the representative of the Kyoto School rather assumes, that being and non-being belong together like two poles, which both are grounded in the "absolute nothing."<sup>37</sup>

## 4 Tillich in Japan

Up to now I have referred to the "intellectual dialogue" that Tillich engaged in with Hisamatsu before he went to Japan. The discussion focused on philosophical questions. The emphasis changed when Tillich went to Japan – in a context

---

<sup>34</sup> See also the difference that Tillich describes in the report on his journey in GW XIII, 504.

<sup>35</sup> See Paul Tillich, "Religion and Secular Culture (1946)," in MW II, 197–207.

<sup>36</sup> Schüßler and Sturm, *Paul Tillich*, 112f.

<sup>37</sup> See the precise summary in Schüßler and Sturm, *Paul Tillich*, 245. Hans Waldenfels, *Absolutes Nichts. Zur Grundlegung des Dialogs zwischen Buddhismus und Christentum* (Freiburg / Br.: Herder, 1976).

shaped by Buddhism and Shintoism.<sup>38</sup> The philosophical and theological questions still accompanied him when he was in Japan, however now they were examined as to how Buddhism influenced the religious praxis of its adherents, or to use a Christian concept, their praxis of piety, and more generally: How does Buddhism determine people's lives? How do Buddhists pray? How does Buddhist spirituality express itself in daily life, in politics, and society? Are or were there religious renewal movements that worked against an established Buddhist movement comparable to the Reformation in Christianity? He was told that Shin Buddhism and Zen Buddhism were such movements. Perhaps the most important question was: How does Buddhism influence the flux of history? Does it have an impact on the current state of affairs in the social and political arena? Does it break open hardened structures and bring forth new forms of life? In Christianity he sees this power portrayed in the symbol of the kingdom of God. Is the foundational attitude of Buddhism, in contrast, more "conservative" (in terms of conserving the status quo), detached from the world, disinterested in history? What is the value of the individual, when the goal of the spiritual path consists in the extinguishing of the individual?

Hisamatsu had already clearly said to him that the individual and the particular are not extinguished in the Formless Self. Rather, they come to their authenticity here. What does this mean? To find one's authentic self in the not-self? What about ethics? Does Buddhist spirituality remain at the level of mere compassion for the sufferer or does it give rise to a practiced love for one's neighbour?

The encounter with Japanese culture and religions not only produced many fascinating insights but also brought before his eyes the deep differences between the cultural worlds. In the Matchette lectures, Tillich looked back and summarized once more the differences between the Eastern and Western ways of thinking in relation to the ethical significance of the individual, the personal character of the divine over against the transpersonal Absolute, the infinite distance between the individual person and the personal divine being brought about by human guilt, and the necessity of forgiveness over against the elevating of the spiritual human to the formless self.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, Tillich refers to the doctrine of creation and the meaning of history. Again and again he poses the question of the ontological status of the particular and/or the individual.

---

**38** See Marc Boss, "Tillich in Dialogue with Japanese Buddhism: A Paradigmatic Illustration of his Approach to Inter-religious Conversation, in *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich*, ed. Russell Re Manning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 254–272.

**39** Tillich, *The Encounter*, 27 f.

Critics have accused him of approaching his encounter with Buddhism in a way that was too strongly shaped by Western categories and for making use of a far too schematic set of differences and contrasts. Furthermore they criticized that he only got to know a small section of Buddhism and then mainly from its philosophical side, although doctrine and life in Buddhism is diverse. Despite these criticisms, one cannot expect from a pioneer more than pioneering work. In his time, in which the encounter with foreign cultures and religions was not yet a theme for theology, Tillich made this excursion and through this made a significant contribution to theology.

The genuine significance of his encounter with Buddhism in Japan does not lie in the theological and philosophical discussions but rather in his immersion in a foreign cultural world and its life forms. As Tillich indicated in his retrospective reflections, his trip brought about a profound transformation. The transformation was no longer on an intellectual but rather on a cultural and ultimately on an existential level, and had repercussions for his theology. According to Mircea Eliade, Tillich stated shortly before his death that he intended to rewrite his *Systematic Theology* in the light of his encounter with other religions.<sup>40</sup> In this way the sentence from 1946 gained a new and unexpected meaning: “There are two ways of approaching God, the way of overcoming estrangement and the way of meeting a stranger.”

---

<sup>40</sup> Mircea Eliade, “Paul Tillich and the History of Religions,” in Brauer, *The Future of Religions*, 33–35.

