

K.M. AU / Paul Tillich's Concept of the New Being

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Kin-ming AU*

Christianity is not merely a general cultural expression of the human religious response to the createdness of existence, but also one founded in particular reference to the historical person Jesus. Therefore, the unique focal point of Christian theology is Christology, the study of how Jesus is the Christ, and what that means. In this paper, I am trying to discuss Tillich's Christology in reference to the symbol of the New Being. As Langdon Gilkey points out, the central category or symbol for Tillich's theology is the New Being. It is the fundamental principle explanatory of Tillich's Christology.¹ Gilkey continuously says that the New Being is also "the creative principle for religions generally and for the Christian religion among the religions."² In other words, Tillich's concept of the New Being can contribute to the dialogue between Christianity and the Chinese religious tradition, or even can contribute to the future development of Chinese Christian Christology.

Introduction

According to Tillich, "Christianity is what it is through the affirmation that Jesus of Nazareth, who has been called 'the Christ,' is actually the Christ, namely, he who brings the new state of things, the New Being."³ Jesus as the Christ is the medium of the final revelation. Through his sacrifice of himself on the cross, he retains "his complete transparency to the ground of being."⁴ Jesus as the Christ is the symbol of the ground

* Kin-ming Au is Associate Professor of Religion and Culture of Lutheran Theological Seminary, Hong Kong.

1 Langdon Gilkey, "The New Being and Christology" in *The Thought of Paul Tillich*, James Luther Adams et al ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p.307.

2 Ibid.

3 Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, p.97.

4 Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, p.136.

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of being, manifests the power of God presenting in a person, a person subject to all the conditions of existence. Through Jesus as the Christ, we can see the divine participation in existential estrangement.⁵

Furthermore, Jesus as the Christ's victory over existential estrangement brings the New Being to all humanity.⁶ New Being is the new reality in which the self-estrangement of our existence is overcome. It is a reality of reconciliation and reunion, of creativity, meaning, and hope.⁷ "New Being is essential being under the conditions of existence conquering the gap between essence and existence."⁸ New being is new because it is the undistorted manifestation of essential being within and under the existential conditions. It is new because it is not the merely potential character of essential being; and it is new because it overcomes the estranged character of existential being. In other words, New Being is actual, conquering the estrangement of actual existence.⁹ Thus, New Being is the healing of human estrangement, and yet is not a mere return to the essential nature. Instead, it is a reconciliation within actual existing nature with its essence and its ground.¹⁰

Six Aspects of the New Being

In *Systematic Theology*, Tillich emphasizes six aspects of the New Being:

1) Jesus as the Christ brings in the new eon.¹¹ In the new eon there is an end to the cleavage between essential and existent being. There is an end to the law, because there is no need for a law to stand against our existence, commanding and judging it. There is an end to existence lived in estrangement, conflicts, and self-destruction. There is even an end to history. All of these "ends," however, preserve "the double sense of the word 'end,' namely, 'finish' and 'aim.'" "This oscillation between 'already' and 'not yet' is the experience which is symbolized in the tension between the first and second

⁵ Dreisbach, *Symbols and Salvation*, p.145.

⁶ Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace*, p.126. Langdon Gilkey contends that the New Being is the central category or symbol for Tillich's theology. See Gilkey, *Gilkey on Tillich*, p.138.

⁷ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, p.49.

⁸ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, pp.118-119.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.119.

¹⁰ Dreisbach, *Symbols and Salvation*, p.146; also see Kenan B. Osborne, *New Being*, pp.182-184.

¹¹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, pp.119-120.

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comings of the Christ; it belongs inseparably to the Christian existence.”¹²

Several points about this aspect of the New Being bear mention. First, “New Being” is inherently a dynamic concept. In fact, for Tillich, the new must be radically new, and not simply a rearrangement of the old. In other words, the New Being is contrary not only to what is, but also to all that is humanly expected, even to all that is opined to be possible. Second, the New Being ushers in a new realm, symbolized as the Kingdom of God, which is not another realm in some supernatural world. Where the New Being is, there the Kingdom of God is. Thus, the New Being is the New Being for both life and history. Third, the way in which the New Being appeared in Jesus as the Christ transforms the very idea of Christ, New Being, and new eon. The task of the New Being is to overcome the gap between essence and existence, not by an escape from history, and not by the creation of the full-blown kingdom within history, but by revealing the meaning and depth of life within history.

2) The New Being has appeared in a personal life. Tillich contends that only in a personal life could the New Being have appeared. “The New Being has appeared in personal life, and for humanity it could not have appeared in any other way; for the potentialities of being are completely actual in personal life alone.”¹³ Continuously, Tillich states that only persons are fully developed selves with a world, possess the complete set of the polarities of being, are completely individualized, have an unlimited power of self-transcendence, and have full finite freedom and thus destiny.¹⁴

3) The New Being in Jesus as the Christ expresses itself through Jesus' words, deeds, and suffering. First, Tillich underscores that neither his words, nor his deeds, nor his suffering make him the Christ. There is no such adoptionism, because the being of the Christ beyond the split between essential and existential being is prior to the expressions of that being. In particular, Tillich focuses on the protective nature of this understanding. Focusing on words alone either leaves Jesus as just another great prophet, preacher, or teacher or leaves Jesus as the new lawgiver and legalist. Focusing on his deeds has more justification, but if it leads to a “copycat” understanding of the *imitatio Christi*, we lose the ultimacy of the life of Christ by considering it to be a set of highly

12 Ibid., p.120.

13 Ibid., p.118.

14 Ibid.

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contingent personality traits and responses to situations to copy. The theological attention paid to his suffering is also justified, but wrong if separated from his being, since the sacrifice is an expression of that being.¹⁵

4) The New Being in Jesus as the Christ conquers estrangement. Tillich emphasizes the full humanity of Jesus as the bearer of the New Being. Tillich's "I start with man"¹⁶ applies not only to the existential question; it applies also to Christology. For him, Jesus is clearly a fully human individual. "He has only finite freedom under the conditions of time and space."¹⁷ The biblical record also affirms the complete finitude of the Christ and the reality of the temptations growing out of finitude.¹⁸ In fact, to deny the reality of the temptations is a "monophysitic distortion."¹⁹ Indeed, Jesus had real desire for the objects of temptation. But, according to Tillich, desire per se is good; it is desire against God, and hence desire to be without God, that would negate the messianic quality of Jesus as the Christ. However, at that point desire becomes concupiscence; and this is precisely the point at which Jesus, by maintaining his unity with God, does not cross over the line into concupiscence. Because of his unity with God, Jesus has no unbelief, namely, the removal of his personal center which is the subject of his infinite concern.²⁰ Even in his despair, he cries out to the God who has forsaken him. "The biblical picture shows no trace of hubris of self-elevation."²¹ He accepts violent death. The term "sinlessness" is a poorly-chosen rationalization, but the truth is that in Jesus as the Christ the forces of estrangement are conquered. Even his participation in tragic guilt "did not produce estrangement" and "did not split his personal center."²² He takes "the negativities of existence into unbroken unity with God."²³ Therefore, Tillich concludes that the picture of the New Being in Jesus as the Christ is not the picture of a divine-human automaton without serious temptation, real struggle, or tragic involvement in the ambiguities of life. It is also the picture of a

15 Ibid., pp.121-125.

16 Ibid., pp.121-125.

17 Ibid., p.126.

18 Ibid., p.127.

19 Ibid., p.128.

20 Ibid., p.126.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., p.133.

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personal life, which is subjected to all the consequence of existential estrangement, but wherein estrangement is conquered in himself and a permanent unity is kept with God. Into this unity Jesus accepts the negativities of existence without removing them.²⁴

5) The New Being has an historical dimension in its community, including both the community which prepared for its appearance and the community which the New Being creates and which affirms Jesus as the bearer of the New Being. This rules against any required flying leap from the present to the years "1 through 30." It rules against any devaluation of the life and history of the Church. "The New Being has a spatial breadth in the community of the New Being and temporal dimension in the history of the New Being."²⁵

6) Finally, there are conflicting elements in the picture of Jesus as the Christ. Tillich focuses on contrasts between the synoptic gospels and John, although elsewhere he makes comparisons including Paul and other New Testament writings. The synoptics emphasize that Jesus' sayings are kingdom-centered; in John, they are Christ-centered. In the synoptics, Jesus tends to appear as the announcer of the kingdom; in John, he tends to be presented as the one who presides in judgement and salvation over the kingdom's inauguration. These contrasts are not absolute, nor do they necessarily conflict. In fact according to Tillich, a cryptomonophysitic preference for John has simply read the synoptic words as if they were uttered by the exalted Johannine Christ, regardless of difficulties therein entailed.

New Being is the Being of Love

Furthermore, the New Being, for Tillich, "can be characterized as the Being of Love. Love is the drive toward reintegration of what has been alienated."²⁶ Now the question is raised, how can we experience the New Being? Tillich provides the answer that, if we "asked with existential seriousness, the answer is implied in the question, for existential seriousness is evidence of the impact of the Spiritual Presence upon an individual."²⁷ If

23 Ibid., p.134.

24 Ibid., pp.134-135.

25 Ibid., p.136.

26 Tillich, "The Importance of New Being for Christian Theology" in *Man and Transformation*, Joseph Campbell ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964), p.174.

27 Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, p.223.

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we are ultimately concerned about our state of estrangement and about the possibility of reunion with the ground, we are already in the grip of the Spiritual Presence.²⁸ At this moment, our question is already answered. The New Being as the Being of Love is the “ultimate criterion of every healing and saving process.”²⁹ Through Jesus as the Christ, the continuing salvation of God is manifested.

With the concept of the New Being, Tillich offers his concept of atonement. Basically, there are six principles of atonement. First, God alone creates the atoning processes. The Christ as the bearer of the New Being mediates the reconciling act of God to us. Second, there are no conflicts in God between God's love and God's justice. Third, there is no implication that human sin or human existential estrangement is being denied in God's atoning act. Fourth, God's atoning act does not mean that God removes human estrangement and its consequences. Instead, God participates in human estrangement and transforms those who participate in God's participation. Fifth, the Cross of the Christ is the manifestation of God's participation in existential estrangement and the criterion of all other manifestations of God's participation in the suffering world. Last, when one participates in the New Being, which is the being of Jesus as the Christ, one also participates in the manifestation of the atoning act of God.³⁰ These principles of atonement are God's saving act in Christ, but it cannot be effective alone. It needs humans to participate in God's participation, to accept it, and to be transformed by it.³¹ These principles are also the basis for Tillich's threefold description of the state of salvation.

According to Tillich, the threefold character of salvation is regeneration or participation, justification or acceptance, and sanctification or transformation. In regeneration, humans are in “the state of having been drawn into the new reality manifest as Jesus as the Christ.”³² Humans participate in this reality and are reborn through participation. Justification, as the second character of salvation, is placed after regeneration. “Justification brings the ‘in spite of’ into the process of salvation.”³³

28 Ibid.

29 Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, p.168.

30 Ibid., pp.175-176.

31 Ibid., p.176.

32 Ibid., p.177.

33 Ibid., p.178.

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Objectively, justification is an eternal act of God, totally without any human effort. God alone accepts those who are indeed estranged from God and takes them into the unity of the New Being, the Christ. On the subjective side, justification depends on the acceptance. What this means is that humans must accept that God accepts them. They must accept acceptance.³⁴ Actually, regeneration and justification are one and describe the reunion of what is estranged. Regeneration is the reunion and justification is the paradoxical character of this reunion.³⁵ The final character of salvation is sanctification or transformation, which is distinguished from the previous two “as a process is distinguished from the event in which it is initiated. ...Sanctification is the process in which the power of the New Being transforms personality and community, inside and outside the church.”³⁶

In order to understand this threefold character of salvation completely, we have to understand its relation to Tillich's idea of faith. The only way humans can know that they are accepted is through faith. Once humans understand the reality of the New Being, they take their steps through faith toward the New Being and its promise of salvation. After being established in faith, then humans will be assured that they are accepted in spite of their existential estrangement.

To reiterate Tillich's idea of faith, it is “the state of being grasped by the ultimate concern.”³⁷ This is the formal or general definition of faith. According to this definition, Tillich argues that everyone has faith because everyone is concerned ultimately about something. Thus, this formal definition of faith is basic and universal.³⁸ Moreover, there is the material definition of faith. “Faith is the state of being grasped by the Spiritual Presence and opened to the transcendent unity of unambiguous life. ...one could say that faith is the state of being grasped by the New Being as it is manifest in Jesus as the Christ.”³⁹ In this material definition, Tillich argues that there are three elements of faith. The first one is the element of being opened up by the Spiritual Presence. It is faith in its receptive character, which is regeneration. The second one is

34 Ibid., p.179.

35 Ibid., p.179.

36 Ibid., pp.179-180.

37 Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, p.130.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid., p.131.

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the element of accepting it in spite of the infinite gap between the divine Spirit and the human spirit. It is faith in its paradoxical character, and hence it is justification. And the third moment is the element of expecting final participation in the transcendent unity of unambiguous life. It is faith in its anticipatory character, which is sanctification.⁴⁰ The first two of these elements are like accepting acceptance and the final one is a process toward the future.

Furthermore, Tillich elucidates the relationship between faith and courage. Although "Spiritual Presence" or "New Being" is unambiguous, it is fragmentary in its manifestation in time and space. That is to say, the New Being is only fragmentary in human existential experience. Therefore, "faith is certain in so far as it is an experience of the holy. But faith is uncertain in so far as the infinite to which it is related is received by a finite being. This element of uncertainty in faith cannot be removed, it must be accepted. And the element in faith which accepts this is courage."⁴¹ Due to the element of uncertainty in faith, courage is "the daring self-affirmation of one's own being in spite of the powers of 'nonbeing' which are the heritage of everything finite."⁴² Courage is the element of faith and is related to the risk of faith. But we cannot replace faith by courage, and yet we cannot describe faith without courage.⁴³

Finally, we turn back to love as representative of Tillich's *raison d'être*. "Whereas faith is the state of being grasped by the Spiritual Presence, love is the state of being taken by the Spiritual Presence into the transcendent unity of unambiguous life."⁴⁴ Like faith, love also has the receptive, paradoxical, and anticipatory character of the New Being. First, it accepts the object of love without restrictions. Second, it holds this acceptance in spite of the estranged, profanized, and demonized state of its objects. And third, it re-establishes the holiness, greatness, and dignity of its object; and takes its object into the transcendent unity of unambiguous life.⁴⁵ In this regard, "the concern of

40 Ibid., pp.133-134.

41 Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith*, p.16.

42 Ibid., p.17. "Courage is the self-affirmation of being in spite of the fact of nonbeing. It is the act of the individual self in taking the anxiety of nonbeing upon itself." Tillich, *Courage to Be*, p.155.

43 Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith*, p.103. Guyton B. Hammond argues that courage is a power of being, which is derive from the ground of being. See Guyton B. Hammond, *Man in Estrangement*, p.140.

44 Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, p.134.

45 Ibid., p.138.

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faith is identical with the desire of love: reunion with that to which one belongs and from which one is estranged."⁴⁶ Therefore, faith and love are two sides of a coin. "Faith without love is a continuation of estrangement and an ambiguous act of religious self-transcendence. Love without faith is an ambiguous reunion of the separated without the criterion and the power of the transcendent union."⁴⁷ Both faith and love move in the same way. "Being grasped by God in faith and adhering to God in love is one and the same state of creaturely life. It is participation in the transcendent unity of unambiguous life."⁴⁸

Conclusion

Traditionally, one of the controversial issues of Christology is the conflict between the divine and human in Jesus Christ. Although Chalcedon's two-nature theory serves well to guard against the loss of one or the other essential side of Jesus Christ, historically, the dominant failing of the traditional two-nature formula has been the loss of the Jesus-character of Jesus as the Christ. Here, Tillich's concept of the New Being shifts the paradigm of understanding Christology. For him, Christology does not speculate on the union of divine and human nature in Jesus Christ because God is beyond essence and existence. Rather, the New Being is expressed by the Jesus-character of Jesus as the Christ and by the Christ-character of Jesus as the Christ, but neither divine nor human nature is properly attributable to the New Being. God is less than personal, and may be described as three *personae*, but not persons. Given this understanding of the New Being, Tillich's Christology has resolved the problem of the two-nature theory.

Moreover, Jesus as the Christ, for Tillich, is the symbol of the ground of being, which manifests the power of God present in a person, a person subject to all the conditions of existence. However, he overcomes human existential estrangement and brings New Being to all humanity. New Being means the new reality in which human existential estrangement is overcome. It is the reality of reconciliation and reunion, of creativity, meaning, and hope.⁴⁹ For Tillich, the New Being "can be characterized as

⁴⁶ Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith*, p.112.

⁴⁷ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, p.129.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.138.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p.49.

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the Being of Love.”⁵⁰ As the Being of Love, the New Being is “the ultimate criterion of every healing and saving process.” Therefore, in relation to Jesus as the Christ as the New Being, our faith is “the state of being grasped by the New Being as it is manifest in Jesus as the Christ.”⁵¹ Humans are invited into this new reality and faith is the element of acceptance. Through the New Being, humans can experience the continuing salvation of God that is manifested in Jesus as the Christ by their faith. In this regard, the New Being is the work of the triune God. “This divine presence in the New Being is fundamental to the possibility of human culture, as the experience of the presence of grace is fundamental to our more explicit awareness and knowledge of God in faith.” Here, Tillich's concept of the New Being presents that God reconciles and reunites as God creates and is the root of Trinitarian thinking.

Finally, in regard to the Chinese philosophic-religious tradition, “harmony” is the central concept. Cosmologically, harmony is the unity of the polarity of yin and yang forces or elements. Any unity of the polarity of yin and yang is a harmony that carries with it a value; its value is thus its own determinate existence or indeterminate existence in a determinate context. But whether the value of the harmony will last or should be broken depends on how a given thing or hence a given harmony may contribute to a larger harmony or whether it may hurt or damage a larger harmony such as harmony among harmonies or simply relationships among things. Here, we can see that harmony is ontological creativity and has axiological value.

Furthermore, Confucianism focuses on the creativity of heaven and earth in which the value of human existence consists. Parents give rise to the child just as heaven and earth gives rise to humankind. The harmony and unity between heaven and earth and humankind endows and fulfills value in human beings. In Confucian theory of equilibrium and harmony, harmony is the function of the human mind as it responds to the external world in accord with moral principle. In human character, harmony is an inner state in which all feelings and emotions are properly expressed following the Mean. Everyone has emotions, but not all of us can express them properly. To make our emotions harmonious, we must cultivate our character. Therefore, in human existential estrangement, harmony is reunion with that to which one belongs and from which one is

⁵⁰ Tillich, “The Importance of New Being for Christian Theology”, p.174.

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estranged.

In Tillich's thought, New Being as Being of love has no speculation on the union of divine and human nature in Jesus Christ. By participating in Being of love, human beings are able to respond to and reunite with their ontological ground. In this return, human estrangement can be overcome and reunion can be fulfilled. The whole human reality is then in a harmonious state. Therefore, not only can Tillich's concept of the New Being contribute to the dialogue between Christianity and the Chinese religious tradition, but it also can even contribute to the future development of Chinese Christian Christology because it fits into the Chinese philosophic-religious motif - "harmony."

51 Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, p.130.