

Critical Application of Tillich's Thought to Feminist Theology

Mary Ann Stenger*

Abstract

The article intends to show how the ideas of Tillich influenced many feminist thinkers, especially in the field of religious studies, and continue providing insights to feminist theologians in the world today. After a brief overview of the critical incorporation of Tillich's ideas in feminist reflection, especially concerning the passage of a predominantly masculine symbolism for the feminist, two topics are offered to the current debate: the critical use of tillichian approach of ethics and the religion of the concrete spirit. In both cases, it is to reconcile the universal with the particular. Feminist authors as Mary Daly, Elizabeth Johnson, Morny Joy and Sally McFague are brought into the discussion on the subject.

Keywords: Paul Tillich, feminist thought, religious symbolism, ethics, concrete spirit.

Aplicación crítica del pensamiento de Tillich a la teología feminista

Resumen

El artículo se propone mostrar cómo las ideas de Tillich influyeron a muchas pensadoras feministas, especialmente en el campo de estudios religiosos y siguen aportando ideas a las teólogas feministas en el mundo hoy. Después de un breve resumen de la incorporación de ideas críticas de Tillich en la reflexión feminista, especialmente sobre el paso de un simbolismo predominantemente masculino para la particularidad feminista, se ofrecen dos temas para el debate actual: el uso crítico del enfoque tillichiano de la ética y la religión del espíritu concreto. En ambos casos, el fin es reconciliar lo universal con lo particular. Están presentes en la discusión como autor feminista Mary Daly, Elizabeth Johnson, Morny Joy y Sally McFague.

Palabras claves: Paul Tillich, pensado feminista, simbolismo religioso, ética, espíritu concreto.

* Mary Ann Stenger is Professor Emerita of Humanities, University of Louisville (USA). She has published numerous articles on Paul Tillich's thought and co-authored with Ronald Stone *Dialogues of Paul Tillich* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2002). E.mail mary.stenger2@louisville.edu.

Aplicação crítica do pensamento de Tillich à teologia feminista

Resumo

O artigo pretende mostrar como as ideias de Tillich influenciaram várias pensadoras feministas, especialmente no campo dos estudos de religião, e continuam fornecendo intuições a teólogas feministas no mundo atual. Após um breve panorama da incorporação crítica de ideias de Tillich na reflexão feminista, especialmente a respeito da passagem de um simbolismo predominantemente masculino para a particularidade feminista, dois temas são oferecidos para o debate atual: o uso crítico da abordagem tillichiana da ética e a religião do espírito concreto. Em ambos os casos, trata-se de conciliar o universal com o particular. São trazidas para a discussão autoras feministas como Mary Daly, Elisabeth Johnson, Morny Joy e Sally McFague.

Palavras-chave: Paul Tillich, pensamento feminista, simbolismo religioso, ética, espírito concreto.

Paul Tillich clearly was not a feminist theologian, yet his ideas influenced several feminist thinkers in the 1970s and still today continue to provide insights to some contemporary feminist religious scholars. In this essay, I will provide a brief overview of some past applications of Tillich's thought in feminist theology and then offer two proposals for incorporating ideas of Tillich into feminist theology and ethics.

Moving Beyond Male-dominated Symbolism to Feminist Particularity

Although feminism was a fairly quiet movement during Tillich's life, he did recognize the absence of female symbolism in Protestant theology. Most directly, we see this in his discussion of the Trinity in volume III of his *Systematic Theology* where he notes the Protestant purging of the symbolic power of the Virgin Mary and states that "exclusively male symbolism prevailed in the Reformation." He then raises the question of whether there are elements in Protestant symbolism that could be developed over against this "one-sided male-determined symbolism" (Tillich, 1963, p. 293). He suggests that the "ground of being," which he sees as part conceptual and part symbolic, could point to "the mother-quality of giving birth, carrying, and embracing, and, at the same time, of calling back, resisting independence of the created, and swallowing it" (Tillich, 1963, p. 294). He sees his emphasis on God as the power of being as a way to reduce "the predominance of the male element in the symbolization of the divine." He then argues that

the self-sacrifice of Jesus as the Christ “breaks” the contrast of male and female and that “the ecstatic character of the Spiritual Presence” transcends “the alternative of male or female symbolism in the experience of the Spirit” (Tillich, 1963, p. 294).

Tillich is correct that his ontological theology offers an alternative to traditional male-dominated Christian theology, both Protestant and Roman Catholic. But as feminist thinker Mary Daly recognizes, Tillich’s ideas need both application and transformation. She incorporates aspects of his ontological concepts and symbols in her 1973 ground-breaking work, *Beyond God the Father* even as she moves well beyond Tillich. At that time, she saw his theology as “potentially liberating in a very radical sense” but also as too “detached” from sexual oppression (Daly, 1973, pp. 20-21). In *Gyn/Ecology* (1978) and *Pure Lust* (1984), she develops more fully her own post-patriarchal language with no clear roots in Tillich, but she still occasionally uses and critiques some of his ideas. These include 1) his understanding of symbols as opening up new levels of reality but also possibly dying as situations change; 2) his analysis of courage; and 3) his distinction between ontological and technical reason (Daly, 1984, pp. 25, 223, 155-161).

Several other early feminist theologians also critically employed some of Tillich’s ideas. This is not surprising, as he was among the top three or four twentieth century thinkers read in colleges, universities, and seminaries in the United States in the mid-to-late twentieth century. (The other major thinker influencing early feminist religious thought was Alfred North Whitehead, who, like Tillich, employed language quite different from the usual patriarchal Christian terms.)

Sallie McFague, in *Models of God* (1987) picks up on Tillich’s recognition of the mother quality in understanding God as the ground of being but develops it into a more specifically feminist metaphor of God as Mother, the counterpoint to God the Father. She discusses other elements of Tillich’s thought, including *agape*, sin, and Spirit, and notes his influence on her ideas, but her work moves in directions quite different from his, especially with her understanding of the world as God’s body. But I note that while not a direct influence, his understanding of the power of being participating in everything that is has some parallels with McFague’s theology of the interrelationship of God and the world.

Several feminist theologies work with a method of correlation similar to Tillich’s, bringing together the questions and issues of their contemporary cultural

situation and responses from the Christian message. While Tillich's use of this method in his *Systematic Theology* is more ontological, pulling out universal qualities of reason and reality, feminist theology and many other liberation theologies focus on local, political, cultural issues.¹ We can see this especially on how they understand the role of experience in developing theology.

For Tillich, experience is an important medium of theology and a key element in the truth of religious symbols, a view incorporated in the approaches of many feminist theologians, including womanist and *mujerista* thinkers. Both Tillich and many feminist theologians distinguished between experience as a medium for theology and sources of theology. For Tillich, sources include the Bible, church history, history of religions, and history of culture, with their connection to the event of Jesus as the Christ determining their importance; experiences, then, are the medium for interpreting the sources (Tillich, 1951, p. 40). Tillich spoke ontologically and existentially about experience whereas feminist theologians focus more particularly on their concrete experiences. For example, Delores Williams (1993) emphasizes black women's struggles, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz (1996) privileges Latina voices, and Kwok Pui Lan (2005) Asian voices.² As this type of particularity increased in feminist theological work, Tillich's ontological theology received much less attention.

Mary Daly and Jewish feminist Judith Plaskow critique Tillich's doctrines of sin and grace for their implicit focus on male experiences (Daly, 1973, p. 45; Plaskow, 1980, p. 3).³ Plaskow argues that Tillich provides some helpful categories for addressing women's experience, such as his appreciation of the ambiguities in self-sacrifice or the challenges of self-hate or uncreative weakness, but she finds this missing in his discussion of the Fall and estrangement (Plaskow, 1980, pp. 114-118). Similarly, she appreciates Tillich's understanding of grace as a spiritual source for self-creation and autonomy but argues that his ontological structure and theological analysis need more concrete application and attention to the variety of human experiences (Plaskow, 1980, pp. 139, 147). Daly offers more concrete application, providing a detailed analysis of women's self-hate with emotional dependence and false humility as a few of the byproducts (Daly, 1973), pp. 49-55). She sees

¹ See R. Baard (2009), 277-279 and M. Stenger (2004), 146-147.

² For a discussion of Williams and Isasi-Diaz on this issue, see Mary Ann Stenger (2004), 150-152.

³ Plaskow depends in part on Valerie Saiving's argument (1960).

grace and hope rooted in New Being but offers a more concrete woman-focused application than Tillich's conception of the Christ as the New Being provides (Daly, 1973, p. 72).

Over the last several decades, numerous other feminist theologians offer diverse ways of symbolizing God and addressing women's religious and political issues, but references to Tillich's work appear only occasionally. Yet for myself, Tillich's thought continues to provide rich resources for thinking about issues in feminist theology. In the next two sections, I offer some applications of Tillich's thought to feminist ethics and feminist theology.

Value in the Universal: Critical Use of Tillich's Ontological Approach to Ethics

Many postmodern critics, as exemplified in the feminist theologians mentioned above, have challenged 'grand narratives,' universal claims, and ontology/metaphysics for failing to take account of particular people and concrete experiences. The very assumption of the possibility of universal truths has been under attack ... and with good reason. In Christian theology, male-grounded thought, especially that of white European males, dominated the content of most colleges and seminaries and was treated as presenting universal Christian truths. But, as I have argued elsewhere (2009), Tillich's ontology can be a resource for feminist theology, both with respect to methodology but also in relation to issues of justice and power.

In *Love, Power, and Justice*, Tillich's recognition of the ontological interconnection of these three realities prevents over-simplification of any one of them. With respect to love, not only does Tillich offer different qualities of love, including *philia*, *eros* and *agape*, but he also emphasizes that love is one in its most basic ontological sense; love is the "drive towards the reunion of the separated" (Tillich, 1960, p. 28). Love "is the moving power of life," without which being cannot be actual, in Tillich's view (Tillich, 1960, p. 25). Love and power, then, are inseparable in their ontological connection. Love, Tillich argues, "is the foundation, not the negation, of power." The work of love is to "destroy what is against love"; thus, "love must be united with power," including compulsory power (Tillich, 1960, pp. 49-50). But, for Tillich, this is effective only if love is also understood as "the principle of justice." He then derives four further principles of justice, namely 1) adequacy of forms of justice to the content and situation, 2) equality "applied democratically to every human being," which includes the "demand

to treat every person as a person,” 3) freedom of political and cultural self-determination, and 4) the principle of community (Tillich, 1960, pp. 57-62). I note that these principles continue to be manifest in numerous statements put forward by the United Nations that deal with women’s rights, covering political, economic, and educational rights.⁴ The rights of women are built upon a recognition of women as full human persons, deserving full human rights equal with those of men. The challenge, of course, is how to bring about the necessary political changes that will enable this ideal of equality to be realized -- a challenge that leads us to issues of power.

Tillich’s insights into the nature of power show deep insight both for personal relations and for group relations. What he recognizes is that every encounter of one human with another involves a power relation and that one cannot talk about justice without that recognition. I have changed the following quotation for inclusive language:

In any encounter of human with human, power is active, the power of the personal radiation, expressed in language and gestures, in the glance of the eye and the sound of the voice, in face and figure and movement, expressed in what one is personally and who one represents socially. Every encounter, whether friendly or hostile, whether benevolent or indifferent, is in some way, unconsciously or consciously, a struggle of power with power. ... Such struggles start in the life of an individual in the moment of his conception and go on up to the moment of his or her last breath. They permeate one’s relations to everything and everybody one encounters (Tillich, 1960, p. 87).

Moreover, Tillich recognizes that encounters often involve one person in a more superior position to another. He states: “But injustice occurs if in this struggle the superior power uses its power for the reduction or destruction of the inferior power” (Tillich, 1960, p. 88). Clearly, Tillich did not apply these insights and this analysis of power to women’s situation in patriarchy or to other situations of oppression. But we can and should.

By highlighting the power elements in every human relationship and every person to person encounter, Tillich makes it clear that we can never avoid power issues and that all people are affected by them. His acknowl-

⁴ See the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 1995 (www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform).

gement of a differential in power in most human encounters points to how difficult it is to enact equality. Cases of sexual harassment and of unequal opportunities continue to arise because of such differences in personal power. But many of these cases occur in group relations and institutional settings, not just in individual personal encounters. Efforts toward equality will require changes in religious, political, and social structures -- changes that are only possible if we address the power elements in the structures themselves.

When we turn to Tillich's analysis of group relations, we note that discussion focuses primarily on States with attention to rulers. But he also recognizes the centered and hierarchical character of social power in many forms. "It can appear in the control of a society by a feudal group, a military caste, a high bureaucracy, an economic upper class, a priestly hierarchy, an individual ruler with or without constitutional restrictions, the ruling committees of a parliament, a revolutionary vanguard" (Tillich, 1960), p. 94). In their historical manifestations, most of these examples also incorporate patriarchal power, an element not discussed by Tillich. But his analysis of group power as not only expressing the power and justice of the whole group but also the claim of rulers of justice for themselves as rulers could be applied to patriarchal structures. The challenge for feminists addressing religious power is how to counter theological justifications for men as priests and ministers over women. It is much more difficult to break through claims of divine power and divine authority justifying inequality.

Such claims of superiority often incorporate religious symbols, and Tillich's analysis recognizes the power of symbols and ideas as the underlying support of ruling structures (Tillich, 1960, p. 101). Thus, efforts toward greater equality, whether addressing sex and gender or economics or politics, need to address not only the underlying structures but also the ideas and symbols that uphold those structures. Tillich's analysis points to the need for critique, reinterpretation, and perhaps rejection of those ideas and symbols by the people who have been oppressed and by those who may have benefitted but still support greater liberation, equality, and justice. In many ways, efforts to change symbolism, especially for God, encounter greater resistance than work to change the social structures of religious institutions. For example, symbolizing God as Mother may result in greater resistance than accepting women as clerics. Perhaps this resistance stems from an implicit absolutization of male language for God.

With respect to absolutization, Tillich offers another principle that can be connected to efforts for justice, namely the critique of idolatry. This principle is important epistemologically and ethically, with recognition that its roots are ontological.⁵ In his discussion of ultimacy and holiness in the first volume of his 1951 *Systematic Theology*, Tillich states: “Justice is the criterion which judges idolatrous holiness.” Here, he is connecting to the prophets who “attack demonic forms of holiness in the name of justice” (Tillich, 1951, p. 216). In *Dynamics of Faith*, Tillich posits the critique of idolatry as a criterion of the truth of a symbol of faith. A symbol of faith is true if “it expresses the ultimate which is really ultimate. In other words, that it is not idolatrous” (Tillich, 1957, p. 97). If we put these ideas together, as I suggest the prophets did, then we can see that injustice may involve idolatry, the elevation of one group of people as absolute over another; using the critique of idolatry, the ideas justifying that elevation can be declared false. Applying this to patriarchal language and patriarchal structures highlights the absolutization of males both in language and in social structures. The challenge, of course, is that social groups seldom recognize the implicit idolatry in their structures, laws, and language that privilege one group over against another. Not only can we apply this to political and social power for men and women, but today we can also see it in economic power structures privileging a wealthy minority over against the middle and lower classes.

I offer these general applications of Tillich’s analysis of power and his critique of idolatry with the understanding that he grounds these in his ontology interrelating power to love and justice. A religious ethic of love and ethical actions aimed toward justice and equality for women and men must address power at all levels, from the individual to the group. But in moving to the particular issues, we must not lose his theological grounding in the universal. That issue of how to address the particular but keep some element of universal grounding is central to several contemporary theological discussions. In his last lecture, Tillich related it to the need for theology to address the plurality of religions in our world. In the next section, I will use his discussion in that last lecture to address the issue of the particular and the universal for feminist theology.

⁵ For discussion of this in relation to feminism, see Carr, 1988, pp. 101-102, McFague (1982), p. 13 and 2001, pp. 65-66, and Stenger, 2002, pp. 87-88, 96-97, 103, 113-116, 120-139, 147-148.

Holding Together the Particular and the Universal in Tillich's "Religion of the Concrete Spirit"

Religion scholar Morny Joy asks: "How can there be a method which allows for the diversity and complexity involved in the interaction of two autonomous human beings, where the interpreter can no longer take for granted that her specific interpretation of the world, reinforced by her culture and the particular discipline she employs, is all-inclusive and universalizable?" (Joy, 2004, p. 31). Even in discussion of particular experiences, feminist theologians offer understandings that aim toward more universal claims.

The question here is whether there is a theological grounding for feminist theology that can hold together both the particular and the universal elements. In a much earlier essay (1990), I argued that feminist and pluralist critiques of Christian theology share several issues and approaches: relativizing theological concepts and symbols, challenging universal claims of religious truth, criticizing dominant, exclusive structures, and constructing new metaphors and concepts for God and Christ. So here, I explore whether Tillich's idea of the Religion of the Concrete Spirit, focused on the plurality of religions, can be applicable to feminist concerns about universality and particularity.

In his last lecture, Tillich offers the idea of the "religion of the concrete spirit" to hold together the particularity of religious traditions and the direction toward the universal of all religions. As his writings suggest, he came to this understanding as a theological response to his encounters with Buddhists and other non-Christians. But the issues that he raises in that last lecture are issues that theologians face in response to many postmodern critiques of universal claims and grand narratives, including feminist critiques. Here, I interpret this last lecture through a feminist lens, exploring to what extent Tillich's comments about the history of religions can be applicable to and helpful for grounding feminist theological reflection, with focus on the issue of universality and particularity.

Universality and Particularity in the "Religion of the Concrete Spirit"

Tillich begins with five presuppositions: 1) "revelatory experiences are universally human." 2) humans receive revelation in their finite human situations. 3) "there are not only particular revelatory experiences throughout human history, but ... there is a revelatory process in which the limits of adaptation and the failures of distortion are subjected to criticism." He

notes three types of criticism: mystical, prophetic, and secular. 4) there *may* be (emphasis on *may*) a central event in the history of religions that “makes possible a concrete theology that has universalistic significance.” 5) the sacred is the “depths” of the secular. “The sacred is the creative ground and at the same time a critical judgment of the secular. But the religious can be this only if it is at the same time a judgment on itself, a judgment which must use the secular as a tool of one’s own religious self-criticism” (Tillich, 1966, pp. 81-82). In relation to feminist theology, the first two presuppositions offer grounding for female revelatory experience, received in concrete human situations. The third recognizes adaptation and distortion and argues for critique; clearly, among feminist theologians one can find use of mystical, prophetic, and secular criticism of distortions in the history of Christian theology. With respect to the possibility of one central event that enables a concrete theology with universalistic significance, the event for Tillich is the Cross. While I will work with the double negation Tillich extracts from the event of the Cross, I will also look at the event of the Incarnation. (This can also be explored outside Christian theology, but my focus here is within Christianity.) Finally, the fifth presupposition that posits the sacred both within the secular but also as the creative ground and critical judgment of the secular works well with the inter-relations of secular and theological feminism.

Tillich calls his approach “dynamic-typological” and incorporates both affirmation of “experience of the Holy within the finite” as the sacramental basis of all religions and the three forms of criticism, mystical, prophetic, and secular mentioned earlier. The mystical critique attempts to go beyond the many concrete embodiments of the Holy to affirm the Holy as Ultimate. “The particular is denied for the Ultimate One. The concrete is devaluated” (Tillich, 1966, p. 87). The prophetic also affirms the ultimacy of the Holy but warns against demonic consequences of elevating the finite to ultimacy, often resulting in denial of justice. The prophetic concern with justice brings in the moral dimension, but Tillich emphasizes that this must be integrated with the sacramental and mystical elements or else it becomes “moralistic and finally secular” (Tillich, 1966, p. 87). The secular critique counters religious domination of life that leads to repression of goodness, justice, truth, and beauty (Tillich, 1966, p. 90).

“The Religion of the Concrete Spirit” unites basic “elements in the experience of the Holy which are always there, if the Holy is experienced.” For Tillich, these elements reflect his starting presuppositions,

holding together the universal basis of religion in the revelation of the Holy and the particular, concrete expressions of that. The Religion of the Concrete Spirit both incorporates the whole history of religions and expresses a *telos* toward which all religion aims. Because it is both affirmative of religion and negating in its critical element, its positive expression is always fragmentary. He further characterizes it as “a fight of God against religion within religion” (Tillich, 1966, p. 88).

I note a parallel between Tillich's discussion of the Religion of the Concrete Spirit in this last lecture and his discussion of absolute faith in *The Courage to Be*. Both concepts point to an underlying dynamic depth that grounds all forms of faith and religion but in itself is not tied to any one form of faith or religion. Absolute faith “is always a movement in, with, and under other states of the mind. ... It is not a place where one can live, it 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” (Tillich, 1952, pp. 188-189). In a parallel way, he states that the inner *telos* of every religion is “to become a Religion of the Concrete Spirit” although that cannot be identified “with any actual religion, not even Christianity as a religion” (Tillich, 1966, p. 88). One might say that both are grounded in the God above the God of theism, in the God who is the Unconditioned, beyond and yet underlying all specific expressions of ultimacy. The Unconditioned not only grounds all religions but also posits the demand for expression of ultimacy as well as the critique against absolutizing any particular expressions. The Unconditioned is the dynamic universal ground of all particular religious experiences and expressions.

Yet, in the Religion of the Concrete Spirit, in contrast to absolute faith, Tillich adds dimensions of ethics and knowledge to the activity of the Unconditioned. He invokes *agape* and *gnosis*, connecting them to the ecstatic experience of the Spirit which unites with the rational element. He does not fully develop this interconnection except to say that “the rational structure of which I am speaking implies the moral, the legal, the cognitive and the aesthetic” (Tillich, 1966, pp. 89-90). Of course, this takes us to his much more developed discussion in volume III of his *Systematic Theology*, especially to his discussion of theonomy. In the last lecture, Tillich states that theonomy “appears” fragmentarily in the Religion of the Concrete Spirit but also has a future-directed eschatological dimension, with fulfillment beyond time (Tillich, 1966, p. 90). But the very term “concrete” shifts the focus to

the here and now and also to particular manifestations. Yet the theonomous element carries a universal quality.

Exploring Implications for Feminist Theology

First, Tillich's understanding of God as the Unconditioned, the Holy, or the Ultimate as the source and ground of revelation is not tied to any particular content of ultimacy but opens up the possibility of multiple contents. Recognizing revelation and saving powers in all religions means that contents will vary but share a common root. This does not mean that all contents are equally valid, a point I will discuss later, but it does offer a universal basis for diverse contents. Although Tillich was talking about the many world religions, this point can apply to a universal basis for multiple feminist theologies, including those rooted in diverse ethnic and racial experiences.

Second, Tillich's proposal of the Religion of the Concrete Spirit suggests particularity by invoking the adjective "concrete." But note that "concrete" here has a very specific meaning for Tillich. The Spirit manifests in concrete ways in various religions, albeit fragmentarily, in struggles against demonic and secularist distortions of the Holy (Tillich, 1966, p. 88). The Concrete Spirit is the "fight of God" against religious distortions of God and demonic uses of God and religion. The activity of God is "over against" that which negates God, or as Tillich states it in *The Courage to Be*, the power of being affirming itself against the threat of nonbeing (Tillich, 1952, p. 179).

Many feminists have and continue to "fight" for an understanding of God that transcends the patriarchal Father-God and counters the oppression connected with it. Tillich did not engage as directly as many feminists might have wished in the struggle against patriarchy. But, as we noted earlier, he did recognize the absence of female symbolism in Protestant theology and discussed how his proposed symbols for expressing God counter that absence. His brief statements on this provide seeds of a "fight" against male-dominated theology, but feminist theologians take that fight much further, critiquing not only language but assumptions of the universality of male experience and the pervasive patriarchal structures in society.

Third, the Religion of the Concrete Spirit includes the ethical and the goal of justice. Tillich recognizes that this element can occur both within religion and from the secular against religion. If religion in the name of the Holy represses goodness, justice, truth, and beauty, then secularization can help liberate people from those oppressions (Tillich, 1966, p. 90). While the

element of the ethical may be universal in religion and in the secular world, the critiques themselves take on particular repressions and oppressions. Justice is a demand and a goal, with particular efforts always ambiguous and limited. Feminists, both religious and secular, critique oppressions supported by religions and engage in political efforts to change them or eliminate them.

As discussed earlier, Tillich sees the interconnection of guarding ultimacy as ultimate and working for justice, expressed quite clearly in the prophets. Absolutizing some finite aspect of life generally results not only in idolatry of that element but also in unjust treatment of some group of people. So we might say that the fight of God against religion within religion must also be a fight for justice. Tillich's principle of equality, the demand to treat every person as a person, and the principle of freedom (both internal and external), discussed in *Love, Power, and Justice*, resonate with feminist social and political efforts, both in the secular arena as well as in religious communities. These principles can easily be seen as universal principles, but as soon as one applies them in a specific social matrix, the adequacy of particular forms or laws and the interactions within specific communities come into play and are open to challenge.

Fourth, the Religion of the Concrete Spirit works with religious symbols which bring together the universal and the particular. Symbols bring together the Holy as the universal ground of religious experiences and the particular through the "social matrix" in which the symbols have grown. Tillich states: "Religious symbols are not stones falling from heaven. They have their roots in the totality of human experience including local surroundings, in all their ramifications, both political and economic" (Tillich, 1966, p. 93). He then suggests that the symbols may express a revolt against the specific social situation as well as a reflection of it. This allows for symbols that arise from critical moments and events in history, moments of "*kairoi* in which the Religion of the Concrete Spirit is actualized fragmentarily" (Tillich, 1966, pp. 89, 93).

As we connect these ideas to feminist theology, we can certainly see examples of feminists who experienced the turn from patriarchy as a *kairos* for them, with religious experiences that broke through the patriarchy and opened up symbols that revolted against the traditional expressions, offering new directions for expressing ultimacy. I think of Mary Daly who spoke of God as Verb or the Goddess spinning, Sallie McFague who expressed the symbol of God as Mother, Lover and Friend, Elizabeth Johnson who

explored God as She Who Is, and Carol Christ who reflected on She Who Changes... the list goes on. The universal element in all of these is the underlying ultimacy that grounds religious experience and religious expression. The particular, of course, comes from the particular social matrix in which each was or is living and the particular symbol that grasped each one as true.

Elizabeth Johnson builds on Tillich's theory of symbols, both in recognizing the deep religious experience that grounds symbols as well as the way symbols function. In *She Who Is* she argues: "Women's religious experience is a generating force for these symbols, a clear instance of how great symbols of the divine always come into being not simply as a projection of the imagination, but as an awakening from the deep abyss of human existence in real encounter with divine being" (Johnson, 1992, pp. 46-47). For her, as for Tillich, symbols cannot be produced intentionally but stem from the depths of experience. But that universal ground is expressed in what Tillich calls the social matrix that includes political and economic ramifications. Johnson argues that we must recognize and respond to how a symbol functions psychologically, socially, politically, and religiously (Johnson, 1992, p. 38). Both Johnson and Tillich point out the importance of people's response to symbols as an element of their truth. The symbol must be alive for people and connect to their living situations; this inner response is central to the viability of a symbol (Tillich, 1957, pp. 96-97; Johnson, 1992, pp. 46-47).

Fifth, for Tillich, the ideal symbol and the criterion for a Christian effort to engage in the Religion of the Concrete Spirit is the event of the Cross. For him, "the appearance of Jesus as the Christ" was the "decisive victory" in the struggle of God against religion within religion (Tillich, 1966, p. 88). Tillich understands "the victory on the cross as a negation of any demonic claim," making it the criterion for Christians. But he also argues that the criterion of negation of the demonic "also happens fragmentarily in other places, in other moments, has happened and will happen even though they are not historically or empirically connected with the cross" (Tillich, 1966, p. 89). This criterion of negation that he states in this last lecture had been stated earlier in *Dynamics of Faith* in this way: "The criterion of the truth of faith, therefore, is that it implies an element of self-negation. That symbol is most adequate which expresses not only the ultimate but also its own lack of ultimacy" (Tillich, 1957, p. 97). Thus, for Tillich, the sacrifice of Jesus or Jesus crucified is central to Jesus as the Christ. Stated in another way, the particularity of Jesus' humanity is sacrificed to Jesus as the Christ or the New

Being. On the Cross, Jesus is the Christ. To see Jesus as the Christ without accepting the crucified Jesus is idolatry, in Tillich's view (Tillich, 1957, p. 98).

If one connects this with feminist concerns about God or the Christ as male-identified, this "sacrifice" opens up symbolism not tied to sex and gender. And in some ways this seems very liberating, as Tillich himself suggested in his discussion of "one-sided male-determined symbolism" that dominated Protestant thought (Tillich, 1963, p. 293). For him, the self-sacrifice of Jesus as the Christ breaks through the contrast of male and female (Tillich, 1963, p. 294).

But Tillich's approach here misses a key aspect of Jesus as the Christ, namely the Incarnation, the embodiment of God in Jesus. As feminist theology has evolved over the last few decades, embodiment has become a key issue --not only in relation to one's living in a particular social-cultural context but also in connection with race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and violence. Clearly, this was not an issue discussed theologically in Tillich's time, but I think we cannot ignore it today.

The particularity of the embodied Jesus -- Jewish, male, Middle-Eastern -- does not match most of the European depictions of him. The fact that many artists depict Jesus as looking like their own race and ethnicity shows a connection to the universal meaning and attraction he holds. Today there are artistic depictions that include the female Christa as well as Asian or African or South American embodiments of Jesus, in addition to the white-European images. Perhaps we can say, using Tillich's terms, that people respond to the New Being in Jesus as the Christ but also make that New Being concrete in symbols and images directly connected to their own lives.

Another aspect of Jesus' embodiment that can be significant for feminist work is Jesus' suffering on the Cross, an aspect barely dealt with by Tillich. Artistic depictions of Jesus on the Cross vary greatly in terms of how vivid the imagery of suffering is, with some of the most violent depictions in Spanish and South American art. But the image of Jesus' bodily suffering connects with many people, especially those who have experienced bodily harm or who have watched others endure great bodily pain. Some find hope in identifying with Jesus' suffering while others have been victimized by being asked to endure suffering as a form of connection to Jesus. I will never forget the sermonettes of several Black women reflecting on the Cross on Good Friday some years ago. Each expressed identification with the suffering of Jesus in their stories of their own or family members' recent suffering.

And through that connection, each also elicited hope and the ability to go forward. The concrete aspects of that bodily suffering were key to their experience of the New Being in Jesus. For them, it is not the sacrifice of Jesus' particularity that brings forth the Christ but rather the New Being held *in* the suffering Jesus. The Cross is central but not as an abstracted Cross or an abstracted sacrifice; rather, it is the particular embodied Jesus who is the Christ, the New Being.

By focusing on Jesus as embodied and living in a concrete social matrix, we can open up new or renewed theological possibilities. A former student, who has worked with refugees for the State Department, wrote a wonderful piece on Facebook, arguing against the kind of Christians who want to reject refugees who are not Christian. He points to Mary and Joseph as non-Christian refugees in the same general area as Syria and how those refusing refugees parallel the rejection of Mary and Joseph at the inn. One might say that Jesus was born as a refugee, a helpless baby in the arms of a refugee mother. The Incarnation or the embodied Jesus is important in his particularity as well as in the more universal meanings of the Christ or the New Being.

Both the image of Jesus on the Cross and the image of Jesus as the helpless, baby refugee raise the issue of power. Political power permeates the biblical stories of Jesus, from his birth through the Cross. And power as empowerment is central to the understanding of Jesus as the Christ, the New Being. The universal aspect of power, for Tillich, is the power of being, the active ultimate always affirming power of being over against the threat of nonbeing. For him, nothing is without participation in being itself, in the power of being. There is no courage without such participation. But, of course, everything is in its particularity, in its own concrete form and particular social matrix, in its specific embodiment with particular spiritual, intellectual, and psychological abilities in the case of humans. Tillich posits an "intrinsic claim for justice for everything that has being" (Tillich, 1960, p. 63). He does note that the intrinsic claim is different for a tree than for a person. (It might be interesting to develop an ecological argument based on his understanding of justice. But, here, I will focus on humans.) Each person in his or her power of being has an intrinsic claim to justice, yet how justice is meted out depends on the social-cultural-political structures and specific situation. Once again, we move from the universal claim of justice for everything to the particular circumstances of power struggles, distribution

of justice, power structures, etc. For many Christian feminists, their hope and courage to engage in these struggles is grounded in empowerment they experience through the New Being in Christ.

One critique feminists sometimes leveled at Tillich's theology, as well as at many other Christian theologies, was its failure to see the particular circumstances of women that did not fit the male-identified approaches. Critiques particularly focused on his understanding of sin, guilt, and sacrifice as too abstract or too connected with male experience to be adequate to women's experiences.⁶ And for these, it is more involved than simply seeing women's experiences as examples of estrangement. They are that, but the bodily and psychological dimensions of their experiences often differ from the existential description of estrangement Tillich offers. Unbelief, hubris, concupiscence, and guilt, elements upheld and critiqued by Tillich, contrast to the "sin" of internalizing blame or accepting a low status or failing to resist oppression, etc. I point to these as further examples of the importance of particular embodiment and specific experiences.⁷

Tillich is clear that the Religion of the Concrete Spirit cannot be identified with any one religion, not even Christianity. Even though he uses the event of the Cross as an example of the negation of demonic claims of power, he argues that it can liberate christological dogma and be a criterion for Christians. Still, he does see the symbolic meaning of the Cross as providing a criterion more universal than Christianity. The fight of God against religion within religion involves the negation of absolutizing or demonic claims; that criterion then allows for events in other places and times not connected to the cross (Tillich, 1966, p. 89). This not only opens up fragmentary manifestations in other religions but also in new liberating expressions within Christianity. Feminist theology, like another religion, cannot be identified with the Religion of the Concrete Spirit, but it may, and I would argue sometimes does, offer fragmentary manifestation of it. Feminist theology in its multiple manifestations argues for grounding in revelation and applicability of religious affirmation and critique in very particular cultures and situations.

Tillich's concluding statements to his last lecture bring together the universal grounding of theological expression and the critical element that opens

⁶ As discussed earlier, examples can be found in Daly, 1973, pp. 44-68 and Plaskow, 1980).

⁷ One could expand this critique to include issues of race, sexual orientation, and other forms of oppression.

up new possibilities. He states: “The universality of a religious statement does not lie in an all-embracing abstraction which would destroy religion as such, but it lies in the depths of every concrete religion. Above all it lies in the openness to spiritual freedom both from one’s own foundation and for one’s own foundation” (Tillich, 1966, p. 94). Tillich still asserts the importance of developing universally valid statements but argues that the universality comes from the living depths of religious experience, not from abstractions. And, for him, religious experiences in their depth ground spiritual freedom, a point most feminists would support. Moreover, the freedom is both from the restrictions of one’s religious foundation or tradition and also the freedom for serving that foundation. This connection to one’s religious roots and tradition is central to feminist theological work: freedom from its patriarchal restrictions and freedom for developing and strengthening the more positive elements of that foundation in their feminist theologies. The openness to the new and the experience of the power of new or sometimes renewed but forgotten living symbols keeps a religious tradition connected to people in their current social situations, however diverse they may be. Feminist theological work should be seen as renewing and enlivening the tradition, connecting to many women in their concrete lives. We also recognize that spiritual freedom can open up ethical action and political action, especially in relation to the prophetic or ethical critique that Tillich discusses. Faith and action for justice work together -- for feminists, but not only for feminists -- for all engaged in improving our world.

Conclusion

Whether offering feminist symbols and metaphors for God rooted in particular experiences, as discussed in section one, or reflecting on justice and power, as in section two, Tillich’s ideas still offer helpful insights for feminist theologians. His arguments about the Religion of the Concrete Spirit in his last lecture show a way to bring the issues of symbolism and ethics together, not only for religious pluralism as Tillich does directly but also for feminism: The power of the universal is effective and actual only in particular embodiments, actions, and expressions. And justice is the criterion which judges those actions and expressions, limiting unjust power and affirming empowerment of persons in all aspects of their being.

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