
KIERKEGAARD AND HIS INFLUENCE ON TILLICH'S PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze the relationship between Kierkegaard's thought on the philosophy of Tillich's religion. It is indisputable that Tillich was inspired by Kierkegaard. Tillich used his concepts and saw him as an important representative of existentialism. A common characteristic of both thinkers is the criticism of society and Church conditions. Tillich is also considered to be an existential philosopher. I will focus on Tillich's relationship with Kierkegaard and points to his influence that was, despite different interpretations, undeniable.

Keywords: Kierkegaard, Tillich, theology, religion, philosophy

1. Kierkegaard and Tillich in the context of contemporary schools of thought

Paul Tillich (1886-1965) was influenced by a number of thinkers. Friedrich Schelling and Martin Kähler belonged among the most eminent personalities. The Czech philosopher Milan Sobotka has written about Schelling that „he created one of the ideological assumptions of existentialism“ [1], whereby he has emphasized freedom, will, and the incomprehensibility of the existence. Tillich owes the entire background of his own philosophical system to Schelling. He has spoken of him as being “great teacher” [2].

Neither about Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, nor can you claim about Kierkegaard that Tillich was elaborating and commenting on him in a derogative way. He used to employ the philosophy of both authors with a view to create a mental apparatus and own philosophical interpretation. Tillich often associates Schelling with Kierkegaard, Marx, Feuerbach as well as their criticism of Hegel in the 1840s.

The basic idea is that it is impossible to perceive either oneself or the absolute God with pure reason. We are facing the attribute of differentiation of negative and positive philosophy. Pure reason – negative philosophy – seeks for something determining in its content. That remains, however, unknown. The

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determining element is the experience of God, absolute, and true knowledge of reality. The state of mind finds here its own inability, and it learns the true world. Such a progress from above is a matter of philosophy of revelation, i.e. positive philosophy. Faith overrules knowledge and is synonymous with „positive philosophy“ [3]. Schelling was trying to interpret the world from the Christian perspective, and he is dedicated to exegeses. In the beginning everything is *one*, because everything has its basis in God. On top of all that is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Tillich follows Schelling's later philosophical system (after 1806) and does not forget to point out that Kierkegaard has refused Schelling on grounds of lectures which he has personally visited. However, Tillich continued to emphasize Schelling's influence on Kierkegaard: despite the fact that Kierkegaard did not accept Schelling by calling him by the derogatory expression of an „incredible prattler“, he has adopted his categories [4].

Another important personality, who has exerted influence upon Tillich, namely by emphasizing the justification, was Martin Kähler, Tillich's teacher in Halle.

Between 1905 and 1907 Tillich acquaints himself with Emanuel Hirsch, who belonged among the most significant scholars of Kierkegaard in history. Hirsch “maintained that Kierkegaard helped him to appreciate a subjective knowledge of God” [5]. Ultimately, however, disagreements between them and subsequent breakup follow due to attitudes towards fascism.

Tillich made significant efforts in order to refine his understanding of theological concepts and philosophical attitudes. At the same time, he also expresses a thought ethos of the time, which is its own interpretation of important terminological constructs and symbols, a prerequisite for correct dialectics and correlation, for which Tillich strived in such a convincing way. Like Heidegger, also Tillich strikes the definition of ‘being’. Being is, with respect to conceptual phenomenon appreciation, ontologically primary. However, he perceives being as God -being ‘above’ being as such, while it manifests itself in different intentions of being. That is why Tillich's God is not a supernatural entity among several other entities, but the foundation, on which everything exists. Tillich was convinced that God is ‘Ground of Being’ - the basis of existence. Therefore he emphasizes that God cannot be seen as an ‘object’ that somehow relates to the subject because God equals being whose essence and nature is beyond any subject-object relation. Theonomous metaphysics, apprehended in such a way, creates sufficient basis for Tillich's reflections, on which the legitimacy of Theology can be justified – provided that it communicates its truths in a relevant way, respecting the ethos of the time and the area of expertise in secular society.

Tillich anchors his metaphysical considerations in various application postures towards epistemology, pietism and existentialism. Traditional Christian theology (Augustine, Kant and Luther) perceived the myth of creation as justification for the subject-object relation (God-man), essential for perception of God, but also as a basis for observation of the radical difference between them. Tillich emphasizes exactly this diversity. He considers its denial as attack on

God's holiness as well as man's dignity. According to Paul Tillich, the theological theism is dangerous, it has caused the birth of atheism and existentialism, while even socialism played its part as to the discovery of human value in the form of a creative force capable of change in the creation order. His struggle for the freedom of man lies in the context of a sovereign God, while Kierkegaard's existentialism, Heidegger's atheism, Augustine's mysticism and German pietism form the framework, within which he finds the space for his own dialectical scopes as well as responses to challenges of the time.

2. Nature of Tillich's and Kierkegaard's writings

Paul Tillich and Søren Kierkegaard belong among the thinkers who interpret philosophical and theological questions in an unconventional and interdisciplinary manner. Therefore, both are currently attracting the attention not only of philosophers, theologians, but also religionists, sociologists, writers and others. Both have the ability to reach wide and diverse audiences, including the general public. And, of course, analyses and unusual conceptuality of both of them evoke the most various interpretations and misinterpretations. This is one of the *reasons* why these words were written about Tillich: "There is no more dangerous theological leader alive than Dr. Tillich" [6].

In Kierkegaard's as well as Tillich's texts, their own personal existential experience is notable. Naturally, we cannot interpret their texts in the context of their personalities solely. However, we must accentuate their life experiences and skills because they are writing with an existential preoccupation in the midst of specific events, time and world. They are not only personally experiencing what they are writing about, but they also have an actual reader in front of them, i.e. a man in his marginal situations, from whom they expect response and interest.

The situation at the beginning of the 20th century was however different. Kierkegaard was almost unknown out of Denmark and there was no indication that it could be otherwise. Period situation changed and society had to respond to the horrors of the 1st World War. Kierkegaard's emphasis on suffering, human failure and sin was confirmed. Humanity had to admit that despite scientific-technical development, it was in spiritual crisis. De Lubac, „saw Kierkegaard a thinker who, crucially, kept the sacred alive during the crisis of atheist humanism“ [7].

The subdivision of Tillich's writings is in comparison with Kierkegaard's files more varied. In the case of Tillich, also religious, political and historical studies stand out apart from philosophical and theological writings.

Tillich divided Kierkegaard's writings in a highly peculiar way, based on own interpretation. Kierkegaard was a practical religious writer who wanted to "edify", to "train in Christianity", to incite to "self-examination" and to mediate a "new understanding of Biblical texts" [8]. He "does not accept typical, modern epistemology's concept of moral and religious knowledge, wherein philosophers focus on objective justification (evidence) for our beliefs" [9]. Tillich's division

originates from the period of his tenure in the USA where, in contrast to the period when he was living in Germany, he had developed a more religious profile. This is point of view of Tillich and Kierkegaard and reason why he divided Kierkegaard's writings into: - homiletic, psychological, ethical. The special group are the philosophical books *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* – their main sources is “existential thinking” [8].

3. Common characteristic of Kierkegaard and Tillich- Criticism of society

A common characteristic of Kierkegaard and Tillich is the criticism of social relations. Kierkegaard did not embrace the ideas of the French Revolution and rejected the idea of equality. He has cited the loss of human responsibility as a reason and “prophetically foresaw the impending deadlock Europe” due to the lack of true spiritual sphere of one's life [10]. He became aware of the danger of misuse of the media, which decide what is right and influence strongly social conditions. He has refused the connection of Church and State, where the priests became state officials. He was critical of the freedom of the press, because he was worried about losing the individual who will be afraid to express opinions in public.

Paul Tillich, who entered the war as a German idealist and patriot, became aware of the failure of State and Church after war. Since 1919 he joined the ‘Kairos Group’ – a group of religious socialists in Germany. Kairos is a specific time, the eternal force that was about to go into confusion. He became more politically involved and shaped. He rejected fascism and later he also criticized the American evangelicalism. He accepted neither evangelicalism nor fundamentalism.

It is interesting that Tillich interpreted Kierkegaard's criticism of society and church in a more radical way than Marx and Nietzsche [4, p. 459]. Tillich was aware of the argumentation and inner power of Kierkegaard's thoughts that were dominated by the truth of Christianity.

4. Analysis of Kierkegaard's ideas in the texts of Paul Tillich - their initiatory, inspiratory and provocative aspect

Paul Tillich's way towards Kierkegaard began during his studies at the University of Halle in 1905. He familiarized himself with him as a student of Theology, in the period between 1905 and 1907. It was a deep emotional experience for him. He admired Kierkegaard's personal piety, which penetrated into the depths of man as well as his philosophical grandeur [4]. Kierkegaard was the one who, together with Marx, denied Hegel's ideas and synthesis, criticizing its abstract “intellectual, logical deduction which builds upon imaginary ultimate principles of human thinking that helps to grasp conceptually the evolutionary process of the world as the dynamic of relationships between spirit and the reality in its physical and cultural-social dimensions...” [11]

Kierkegaard's criticism of the Danish society, bourgeoisie, shallowness and hypocrisy of society appealed to Tillich, as left-leaning student. Kierkegaard's writings and magazines (*The Moment*) strengthen his personal hostility to bourgeois values [12].

Tillich came to understand Kierkegaard better through suffering of the 1st World War, in which he served as a field spiritual on the Western Front and where he lived through real anxiety. Suffering and proximity of death had changed him: „He entered the war as a monarchist, idealist and puritan, he returned from the war as revolutionary socialist, cultural pessimist and bohemian dandy“ [13]. Similarly Kierkegaard, who suffered the early death of his mother and discussed the Philosophy and time issues with his father [14]. We can find another characteristic common to Kierkegaard and Tillich, which is „the width of communication skills and intelligence. He knew how to enchant listeners with it.“ [15] Two attributes are notable already at the beginning of Tillich's works. One of these is Tillich's admiration for Kierkegaard and the other is the focus on continuous association of Kierkegaard with Schelling.

Kierkegaard's as well as Tillich's writings reflect their inner struggles with the complex concrete world. Both are at the centre of events, which they analyze and criticize. Both respond to the challenges of their time and want to drag their readers into the same perception of world, which they assumed. They cannot get stuck in a simple explanation and in answers that they were living through in their entire being and personal existence. According to Kierkegaard and Tillich, a man lives through the conflicts and his existence „is filled with anxiety and threatened by meaninglessness“ [16].

Tillich's predominant method has always been to emphasize the correlation between philosophical question and theological answer. Tillich as well as Kierkegaard put emphasis on personal experience. Religious experience always refers to the subject, therefore it cannot be considered in an objective way. Religious experience must always be personal, subjective and consequently false.

The period of emigration (1933-1965) was a prolific publication period for Paul Tillich. It is interesting that he has never directly quoted Kierkegaard. Nevertheless Tillich constantly made the American society aware of Kierkegaard, namely in the form of short studies published as lectures.

The first study is *Kierkegaard in English* from 1942 [16], Tillich took an interest in translations of Kierkegaard into English, especially from the translators Walter Lowrie, David Swenson and Alexander Dru. Tillich highlighted the fact that Kierkegaard's opponent Hans Lassen Martensen was translated already during his life. In the case of Kierkegaard he emphasizes his contribution to the philosophy of existence as well as the fact that Kierkegaard does not regard himself as a Christian; he just tries to show how difficult it is to become a Christian. He points to the danger of Christoph Schrempff's translations from German which underlines the subjective character of Kierkegaard's style and emphasis on the 'existential thinking'. Tillich's emphasis lies in Kierkegaard's criticism of Hegel's system. He associates

Kierkegaard with Socrates during the *Philosophical Fragments* and *Postscript* evaluation. He highlights several striking attributes: Kierkegaard's concern that his ideas will be transformed into paragraphs in the history of religion, Kierkegaard's emphasis on the individual and his existential situation that he perceives as a reason why Kierkegaard did not appear in philosophical books. He defines the existential thinker as a man who is concerned about his existence with infinite passion, unlike a non-existential thinker, scientist or historian [17]. And exactly the personal existential survival is the basis for understanding the relationship between God and man.

5. Conclusion

Tillich highlights Kierkegaard's concepts such as existence, decision, subjective interest, infinity, passionate interest, truth. Man lives in existence – between finitude and infinity. Of course, he defines Kierkegaard along with Schelling as those who have emphasized the existential situation with regard to Hegel's idealistic romanticism. He specifies philosophers who have refused Hegel – Schopenhauer, Feuerbach and Marx. He concludes with the formulation of Kierkegaard's benefit: „So Theology as well as Philosophy needs the Kierkegaardian corrective – he gives correctives, not results or methods“ [17]. However, Tillich never defined these 'corrections' and never quoted Kierkegaard.

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