My Debt to Paul Tillich

Judeochristianity and Paul Tillich's Theology

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Introduction

The 1964 New York World's Fair gave me my first experience with Christianity. I was just a child then. I remember walking into a pavilion with a name having something to do with Missions to the Jews. Being Jewish, I wanted to know what that was all about.

Against the wall was a rack containing various tracts. I picked up one entitled "Do Christians Believe in Three Gods?" It seemed at first to be an explanation of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. But before long it launched into an attack on Jews, about how we are stubborn and faithless, how we accuse Christians of idolatry when it is we Jews who don't know God and will pay the price of an eternity in hell. I was shocked. I picked up some other tracts; they all had the same message. What was this doing in a gala event devoted to world peace?

It was a while before I again attempted to grapple with Christianity. I decided to read the New Testament. I found the Gospel of John, and in its pages I read about the Jews this and the Jews that, the Jews whose father is the devil, the Jews responsible for killing Christ and for every evil thing. That did it for me. I became ardently anti-Christianity, and just tried to forget about it for a while.

But things changed. A friend of mine whom I greatly respected showed me another side of Christianity. She introduced me to the writings of Paul Tillich. She told me about *The Courage to Be,* how in that book Tillich continues talking to God even

after the God he thought he knew disappears. That got my attention. She warned me the book would be rough going, and indeed it was, but I worked my way through it. I was very much impressed by Tillich's discovery of meaning in the depth of meaninglessness.

After that I read the three collections of Tillich's sermons, *The Shaking of the Foundations, The New Being,* and *The Eternal Now*. What I loved about those books was the clear impression that even if Tillich did not have all the answers, he never failed to ask the right questions. There was something disarmingly honest about that. I would often find questions forming in my mind as I read those sermons, then experience shocked surprise as Tillich addressed those very same questions in his next sentence. He seemed to know just what I was thinking. I was especially inspired to find someone who could face life's most tragic experiences without flinching, and still end up with faith.

For the first time, as I viewed Christianity through Tillich's eyes, it began to make sense to me. If Christianity helped Tillich face life with such deep courage and faith, then maybe it was worth exploring. So I tried again. I attended services at the Riverside Church, where the hymns resounding through that rich, deep organ so overwhelmed me that I felt transported into eternity itself. I am indebted to then Senior Minister Ernest Campbell for guiding me to sources that helped me understand the New Testament and especially the significance of Paul.

Thus began an exploration that has lasted to this day. I became very interested in the meaning of faith and how faith helps us face life's tragedies. This interest found expression in real experience as I began working as Music Therapist at Cabrini Hospice, a job I held until the administration in Albany forced our hospital to close. At

the hospice I found so many people whose faith enabled them to face extreme pain and even death with serenity that I became determined to understand what this faith is and how it can help others.

And so faith became the driving idea behind my own theology. I have found ideas from both Judaism and Christianity helpful in articulating this faith. In fact, I believe that an interesting perspective on faith emerges when one views Jewish and Christian tradition not opposed but in continuity with each other. The result is a faith that transcends both Judaism and Christianity, is truly universal, and bridges rather than reinforces separations between people of different religious backgrounds or of no religious background at all. And so I have called this approach to faith "Judeochristianity."

The practical application of this theology (including many stories from hospice) is set forth in my book *Judeochristianity: The Meaning and Discovery of Faith*.[1] The basic theological ideas are summarized in my article "The Real Presence of God: The Basic Theology of Judeochristianity."[2] Having come this far in my theological exploration, I can say that there would not have been a Judeochristianity without Paul Tillich, and so I acknowledge my debt to him. At the same time, while there are many points of convergence between our two approaches, there are also significant differences. Tillich is a systematic theologian; I am not. By training I am a music therapist (and presently a New York State certified long-term care ombudsman), not a professional theologian, so cannot hope to approach the breadth and depth of Tillich's scholarship. Tillich is also a

[1] Charles Gourgey, *Judeochristianity: The Meaning and Discovery of Faith* (Cleveland, Tennessee: Parson's Porch Books, 2011).
[2] Charles Gourgey, "The Real Presence of God: The Basic Theology of Judeochristianity," last modified September 2011, http://www.judeochristianity.org/gods_presence.htm.

Christian theologian; I am not.[3] While Tillich approaches a Christian audience with a "Christian message," my own approach might appeal most to progressive Christians but is intended for a universal audience. I am not interested in doctrinal views of Christ; in fact, I believe that most Christologies have only served to obscure Jesus's basic teaching that we selflessly love one another, instead diverting attention to personal salvation (soteriology) and arcane doctrinal disputes. Nor am I interested in presenting Jesus Christ as a "final revelation," as Tillich does. I do believe that Jesus represents the continuation and culmination of Hebrew prophecy (I allude to this in *Judeochristianity),* and that by drawing Hebrew prophecy to its inevitable conclusion he gave us the blueprint for the salvation of the world, thus entitling him to the designation "Messiah." As for the criticism that as purported Messiah Jesus failed to transform the world, my response is that he gave us all we need to know to do it ourselves, and that no one else will do it for us.

I believe that a mentor's greatest fulfillment comes when students progress beyond imitation and find their own voice. And so my tribute to Tillich will consist both of ideas I have borrowed from him and points where I differ from him. It will also serve as a concise introduction to his theology as well as to my own. In my humble estimation Paul Tillich is the greatest Christian theologian who ever lived, and deserves far more regard than he has received even from his fellow Christians. At the same time, I find gaps in his theology that need to be filled. The adventure continues.

[3] Since formally accepting the Christian faith on April 10, 2016 I would now consider myself a "Jewish Christian Theologian."

Chapter 1

God

Tillich

Tillich describes God in two basic ways:[4]

1. God is the object of our *ultimate concern.*
2. God is *being-itself.*

Both of these require explanation.

Tillich seems to speak of God as the object of ultimate concern in both a relative and absolute sense. In the relative sense a person's "God" is whatever that person is concerned about ultimately:

> God is the answer to the question implied in man's finitude; he is the name for that which concerns man ultimately. This does not mean that first there is a being called God and then the demand that man should be ultimately concerned about him. It means that whatever concerns a man ultimately becomes god for him and, conversely, it means that a man can be concerned ultimately only about that which is god for him.[5]

Anything can be the object of one's ultimate concern, if one is passionately and wholeheartedly committed to it above everything else. It might be God, it might be one's country, it might be one's job, or it might be one's cat. The object of one's ultimate concern need not coincide with what is truly ultimate. In that case, Tillich calls it a *preliminary* concern raised to ultimacy. Another name for that is *idolatry:* "Idolatry is the elevation of a preliminary concern to ultimacy."[6]

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[4] William L. Rowe, "The Meaning of 'God' in Tillich's Theology," *The Journal of Religion* 42, no. 4 (October 1962): 274.
[5] Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 211.
[6] Ibid., 13.

In the absolute sense, an ultimate concern can only apply to what is truly ultimate:

> That which concerns us ultimately must belong to reality as a whole; it must belong to being. Otherwise we could not encounter it, and it could not concern us. Of course, it cannot be one being among others; then it would not concern us infinitely. It must be the ground of our being, that which determines our being or not-being, the ultimate and unconditional power of being.[7]

It remains to explain exactly what Tillich means by "ultimate concern." His definition is biblical:

> We have used the term "ultimate concern" without explanation. Ultimate concern is the abstract translation of the great commandment: "The Lord, our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The religious concern is ultimate; it excludes all other concerns from ultimate significance; it makes them preliminary.[8]

Ultimate concern is no mere intellectual assent but a committed, passionate act of the centered self.

But what does it mean to be ultimately concerned about "being-itself"? What is "being-itself"?

This question has been a real conundrum with Tillich, as well as the subject of much speculation and puzzlement. We should of course begin with Tillich's own words:

> The being of God is being-itself. The being of God cannot be understood as a being alongside others or above others. If God is *a* being, he is subject to the categories of finitude, especially to space and substance. Even if he is called the "highest being" in the sense of the "most perfect" and the "most powerful" being, this situation is not changed.[9]

Immediately we begin with the pivotal idea that God is not a personal being, in sharp contrast to the way most traditional forms of theism view God. Because of this

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[7] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One,* 21.
[8] Ibid.,11-12.
[9] Ibid., 235.

some have wrongly accused Tillich of being an atheist. Indeed, Tillich almost seems to invite such comparisons: “God does not exist. He is being-itself beyond essence and existence. Therefore, to argue that God exists is to deny him.”[10]

Here Tillich is perhaps being intentionally provocative, to shake his readers out of their comfortable preconceived notions of God. But Tillich is no atheist unless the only conceivable notion of God is anthropomorphic. Tillich points out that to exist is necessarily to be limited, to be one being alongside all the other beings that exist, with the defining and separating boundaries common to all beings. Therefore to exist is to be finite. God, not being subject to creaturely limitation, cannot “exist” in this sense. God must be beyond mere existence; therefore, God can only be “being-itself.”

Apparently realizing that the designation “being-itself” requires some explanation, Tillich suggests two other terms for God: *ground of being* and *power of being.*

> Many confusions in the doctrine of God and many apologetic weaknesses could be avoided if God were understood first of all as being-itself or as the ground of being. The power of being is another way of expressing the same thing in a circumscribing phrase. Ever since the time of Plato it has been known—although it often has been disregarded, especially by the nominalists and their modern followers—that the concept of being as being, or being-itself, points to the power inherent in everything, the power of resisting nonbeing. Therefore, instead of saying that God is first of all being-itself, it is possible to say that he is the power of being in everything and above everything, the infinite power of being.[11]

“Ground” and “power” are symbols. The first points toward the foundation, the rational structure of being-itself; the second points toward its dynamism and creativity. Tillich explicitly states that such terms are symbols:

> God is the basic symbol of faith, but not the only one. All the qualities we attribute to him, power, love, justice, are taken from finite experiences and applied symbolically to that which is beyond finitude and infinity. If faith calls God

[10] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One,* 205.
[11] Ibid., 235-36.

> "almighty," it uses the human experience of power in order to symbolize the content of its infinite concern.[12]

> I agree that "ground" and "power" of being are symbolic notions, in so far as they use elements of being (power, cause) in order to circumscribe being-itself.[13]

Because the concept of symbol is so important in Tillich's theology it is worth spending a moment to consider its meaning. A symbol, says Justo González, is

> something that stands for or represents something else, bringing it to mind. Strictly speaking, all words are symbols, for a sound or a set of characters bring the signified to mind. However, some prefer to limit the use of the term "symbol" for a sign that is so imbued with what it signifies that it actually makes the signified present. Such is the case of a national flag or, in the case of Christianity, the cross.[14]

Tillich explicitly uses the term "symbol" in the latter sense. Indicators (e.g. most words) that do not participate in the meaning of that to which they point are not symbols but "signs." Tillich emphasizes that without symbols we could not talk about God:

> Man's ultimate concern must be expressed symbolically, because symbolic language alone is able to express the ultimate....
>
> ...The language of faith is the language of symbols. If faith were what we have shown that it is not, such an assertion could not be made. But faith, understood as the state of being ultimately concerned, has no language other than symbols.[15]

There is, however, one key exception. There is one, and only one, statement we can make about God that is literal and not symbolic:

> The statement that God is being-itself is a nonsymbolic statement. It does not point beyond itself. It means what it says directly and properly; if we speak of the actuality of God, we first assert that he is not God if he is not being-itself. Other assertions about God can be made theologically only on this basis. Of course, religious assertions do not require such a foundation for what they say about God; the foundation is implicit in every religious thought concerning God.

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[12] Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 47.
[13] Paul Tillich, "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism," in Charles William Kegley and Robert Walter Bretall, eds., *Theology of Paul Tillich* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 335.
[14] Justo L. González, Essential Theological Terms (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 167-168.
[15] Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith,* 41,45.

> theologians must make explicit what is implicit in religious thought and expression; and, in order to do this, they must begin with the most abstract and completely unsymbolic statement which is possible, namely, that God is being-itself or the absolute.
>
> However, after this has been said, nothing else can be said about God as God which is not symbolic.[16]

Tillich even goes as far as to offer being-itself as a *definition* of God:

> When a doctrine of God is initiated by defining God as being-itself, the philosophical concept of being is introduced into systematic theology. This was so in the earliest period of Christian theology and has been so in the whole history of Christian thought. It appears in the present system in three places: in the doctrine of God, where God is called being as being or the ground and the power of being; in the doctrine of man, where the distinction is carried through between man's essential and his existential being; and, finally, in the doctrine of the Christ, where he is called the manifestation of the New Being, the actualization of which is the work of the divine Spirit.[17]

This definition has been criticized from many angles, and Tillich responds to some of those criticisms at the beginning of the second volume of his *Systematic Theology.* One important issue for Tillich is to rescue his definition of God from remote and inaccessible abstraction. He makes reference to another work[18] in which he talks about the "God above God," the God that remains when faith in the traditional God of theism has completely dissolved. While not a personal being, this God, the real God for whom the God of theism is actually a symbol, commands our complete devotion: "The source of this affirmation of meaning within meaninglessness, of certitude within doubt, is not the God of traditional theism but the 'God above God,' the power of being, which works through those who have no name for it, not even the name God."[19]

The *power* of being is a symbol meant to point to the fact that "being-itself" is not just a static quality, not merely the fact that things exist. The *power* of being includes

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[16] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One,* 238-39.
[17] Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume Two* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 10.
[18] Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 186.
[19] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume Two,* 12.

God's creative power, of which we will say more. Other symbols clarifying God's nature are *ground,* which we have mentioned, and *abyss.* "Abyss" refers to "the depth of the divine life,"[20] its infinite, inexhaustible power. In other contexts it refers to something more terrifying, "the abyss of possible nonbeing"[21] or "the abyss of meaninglessness."[22] This too is part of the divine life: "God is infinite because he has the finite (and with it that element of nonbeing which belongs to finitude) within himself united with his infinity. One of the functions of the symbol 'divine life' is to point to this situation."[23]

These two senses of "abyss" come together when we understand how theology can respond to the human existential predicament. If we like, we can spend our lives skating over the surface of existence (hoping the ice doesn't crack beneath our feet), never confronting at all the dimension of depth. But once we start asking ourselves questions, looking for values and meanings, taking nothing for granted, we are journeying towards depth.

> Today a new form of this method has become famous, the so-called "psychology of depth." It leads us from the surface of our self-knowledge into levels where things are recorded which we knew nothing about on the surface of our consciousness. It shows us traits of character which contradict everything that we believed we knew about ourselves. It can help us to find the way into our depth, although it cannot help us in an ultimate way, because it cannot guide us to the deepest ground of our being and of all being, the depth of life itself.
>
> The name of this infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being is God. That depth is what the word God means. And if that word has not much meaning for you, translate it, and speak of the depths of your life, of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, of what you take seriously without any reservation. Perhaps, in order to do so, you must forget everything traditional that you have learned about God, perhaps even that word itself. For if you know that God means depth, you know much about Him. You cannot then call yourself an atheist or unbeliever. For you cannot think or say: Life has no depth! Life itself is shallow. Being itself is surface only. If you could say this in complete

[20] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One,* 156.
[21] Ibid., 164.
[22] Tillich, *Courage to Be,* 177.
[23] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One,* 252.

> seriousness, you would be an atheist; but otherwise you are not. He who knows about depth knows about God.[24]

Joy (true joy rather than mirth) leads us to depth. Searching for value leads us to depth. Asking for meaning leads us to depth. And suffering, the ubiquitous threat of nonbeing, leads us to depth. All of this is part of being-itself; it is participation in the divine life.

And ironically, it is the abyss of the threat of nonbeing, which always pushes us off the comfortable surface, that makes possible any approach to divine truth:

> And no hope shall make us ashamed, if we do not find it on the surface where fools cultivate vain expectations, but rather if we find it in the depth where those with trembling and contrite hearts receive the strength of a hope which is truth.
>
> These last words shall lead us to the other meaning that the words "deep" and "depth" have in both secular and religious language: *The depth of suffering which is the door, the only door, to the depth of truth.* That fact is obvious. It is comfortable to live on the surface so long as it remains unshaken. It is painful to break away from it and to descend into an unknown ground. The tremendous amount of resistance against that act in every human being and the many pretexts invented to avoid the road into the depth are natural. The pain of looking into one's own depth is too intense for most people. They would rather return to the shaken and devastated surface of their former lives and thoughts.[25]

God is therefore active as both "ground" and "abyss," forcing us out of our comfortable places to confront the meaning of our existence. What else can we say about God that may coincide with more traditional notions?

Tillich speaks of God as both *living* and *creating.* As a living God, God is not a static identity, or being simply for the sake of being. God is "the eternal process in which separation is posited and is overcome by reunion. In this sense, God lives."[26] The structure of being involves a process, specifically of separation and return. Nonbeing is an integral part of this process and gives movement to the divine life. For Tillich there

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[24] Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), 56-57.
[25] Ibid., 59 (emphasis added).
[26] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One,* 242.

are two ways to think about nonbeing: *ouk on* is simply "nothingness" with no relation to being, while *me on* includes all the ways nonbeing specifically threatens being. It is this threat, its realization, and its ultimate conquest, that supply movement within the process of the divine life. All of this, separation and return, becoming and rest, are included in being-itself. God is not subject to this process; it is not God who evolves and becomes, but all of this happens as part of the structure of being.

God is living, and is also *creating.* The two imply each other. By its very nature the divine life is always creating, and the essence of every creature is a fruit of the divine creativity. Being-itself is never static and it is not neutral. In fact, it is essentially good.

> But God is love. And, since God is being-itself, one must say that being-itself is love. This, however, is understandable only because the actuality of being is life. The process of the divine life has the character of love.[27]

How do we get from "being-Itself" to "being-itself is love"? It is through the process of separation and reunion that is the nature of the divine life:

> This longing for reunion is an element in every love, and its realization, however fragmentary, is experienced as bliss.
>
> If we say that God *is* love, we apply the experience of separation and reunion to the divine life. As in the case of life and spirit, one speaks symbolically of God as love. He *is* love; this means that the divine life has the character of love but beyond the distinction between potentiality and actuality.[28]

And next comes a very key statement: "God works toward the fulfillment of every creature and toward the bringing-together into the unity of his life all who are separated and disrupted."[29] God works to create unity in place of separation, to find those who are

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[27] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One,* 279.
[28] Ibid.*,* 280.
[29] Ibid.*,* 281.

lost, and to heal those who are wounded. Being-itself therefore implies goodness. The nature of the divine life is love.[30]

These considerations of God's nature justify symbols like "Lord" and "Father" in describing God. "'Lord' is first of all a symbol for the unapproachable majesty of God.... 'Father' is a symbol for God as the creative ground of being, of man's being.... a symbol for God in so far as he preserves man by his sustaining creativity and drives him to his fulfillment by his directing creativity."[31]

Thus Tillich begins from a seemingly odd place, a philosophical notion of God as "being-itself," but ends with a more familiar picture of a God of goodness and power, with traditional language still in use but symbolically and not literally.

[30] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One,* 283.
[31] Ibid., 287.

Judeochristianity

Tillich has made an important contribution in moving beyond the surface meanings of the words scripture uses to describe God and presenting the God of the Bible in nonpersonal terms. To see God as a being among other beings, even a supreme being, is to limit God and thus make God finite. And indeed, a God that is literally "personal" comes with many limitations. For one thing, it makes the problem of theodicy unsolvable and perhaps even unintelligible (we will treat the problem of theodicy more fully in the final chapter). There is no way to rationalize how a personal being who is responsible for the world in the shape it's in and who has the power to change it can be deemed worthy of worship. This becomes especially problematic when we consider most forms of petitionary prayer, which encourage the feeling that this God will help us and give us what we need only if we say the right words to "him" in just the right way. Refusing to worship such a being could in fact be considered a moral act. For these reasons religious people should not dismiss atheism easily, because very often the denial of God is motivated by a heartfelt moral protest, in fact a deeper love than many religious people display.

However, once we establish that God is not *a* being but is "being-itself," we run into a problem. The term "being-itself" is incoherent. Tillich wants to get from "being-itself" to those qualities of goodness we normally associate with God. But he cannot do so without making an unsubstantiated jump. "Since God is being-itself, one must say that being-itself is love." Why? There is just as much in being (or perhaps more accurately, nonbeing) that would seem to testify against God's essence being love.

Earthquakes or hurricanes or genocidal wars[32] may represent nonbeing, but they are also things that exist. They are part of being and so being-itself encompasses them. Tillich's justification for equating being-itself with love is that "every life-process unites a trend toward separation with a trend toward reunion."[33] But in the realm of our experience this is manifestly false. When speaking of "life-process," not every separation trends toward reconciliation or reunion. There are no grounds for asserting that being is necessarily loving. One cannot establish a connection between God as being and God as loving simply by asserting it.

A further difficulty comes from the question of whether the term "being-itself" is even intelligible. William L. Rowe calls the concept "ineffable," because "no positive, literal assertion can be made about [it]."[34] This would not be so terrible if "being-itself" were a term we could easily understand, but without further elucidation the term itself is inscrutable. As Tillich states, "every assertion about being-itself is either metaphorical or symbolic."[35]

Indeed, even Tillich seems to have difficulty sticking to a nonpersonal God. Tillich's constant use of masculine personal pronouns to refer to God is problematic. Even if such words are to be considered symbols when referring to God, the question remains whether the symbol is adequate or misleading. It is impossible to refer to God as "he" without thinking of God as a being. Consider this sentence: "God can appear within finitude only if the finite as such is not in conflict with him."[36] What does this

[32] Human beings may have free will, but the personal God chooses not to restrain that freedom to a manifestly irrational extent.
[33] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One,* 279.
[34] Rowe, "Meaning of 'God' in Tillich's Theology," 275.
[35] Tillich, *Courage to Be,* 179.
[36] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One,* 254.

mean? Why can't God appear in finitude unconditionally, if all that is finite is part of creation and hence within the structure of being? If God is "being-itself," then what could possibly exist that would be outside God or in conflict with God?

Tillich defines God in terms of being. The most frequently debated question about God is whether God exists, and modern-day theists and atheists go at each other on this topic as intensely as their predecessors ever did. But the question that most wrenches the human soul is not God's *existence* but God's *goodness.* A God who exists as an amoral force of nature or even as an apathetic or malevolent being would not satisfy the religious quest. The soul that quests for God needs to know that God is *good.* So Judeochristianity takes the opposite approach from Tillich and instead of trying to derive goodness from being, it makes goodness its starting point.

Like Tillich, Judeochristianity maintains that proofs of the existence of God are meaningless. Judeochristianity goes further by holding that God cannot even be defined:

> The existence of God is not a proposition that can be proven true or false. In fact, God cannot even be defined, but only approached through faith. God is too great for anyone to say exactly what God is. But we can consider descriptions of God that aid our understanding. We cannot capture the whole of God in words, but the right description can help us approach spiritual reality.[37]

So how can we best describe God? The Psalms have an interesting suggestion: "O taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8). Whatever God is, the only kind of God that makes sense to a religious seeker is a God who is good. So why not go all the way and locate God in goodness itself? That is what Judeochristianity proposes. We begin with the fact that we actually possess a sense of goodness, of which things are

[37] Gourgey, *Judeochristianity,* 6.

good and which are not. This is an intimation of something eternal, a clue to a reality greater than ourselves.

> This finite sense of goodness has been implanted in us by something beyond ourselves and greater than ourselves. We cannot totally encompass what this is, but our sense of goodness is witness to its existence. Whatever it is, we can call it God. We cannot define God or capture God's essence completely in words, images, or ideas. But we can offer a description of God that may provide a hint of understanding. And since, as we have seen, goodness is good even prior to what God wills, perhaps goodness itself is where we should be looking for God. And so we can refer to God as Absolute Goodness.[38]

"Absolute Goodness," like "being-itself," is not a personal being, but unlike "being-itself" it does not require lengthy elucidation to understand. God is the pure goodness from which our finite sense of goodness is derived. Our human sense of goodness is flawed and incomplete. It may not always be clear what is good in a given situation. Sometimes different goods conflict and the choice of the greater good is not always clear. These are all signs of our finitude. Yet underneath it all we do possess an appreciation of the quality of goodness, which carries with it an awareness that our existence is not arbitrary, that some things are intrinsically good, and that this quality comes from something beyond ourselves and the empirical world.

Making goodness the principal symbol of God, and relying upon our own sense of goodness, are not without problems. On the human plane, goodness almost always comes with some ambiguity. What has good effects for some may have bad effects for others. Even "unconditional love" is not an absolute good, since treating both victim and perpetrator with equally loving actions may only result in more victims. (This is just one problem that results from traditional but self-contradictory notions of "forgiveness.")[39]

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[38] Gourgey, *Judeochristianity,* 9-10.
[39] See Charles Gourgey, "The Mystery of Forgiveness," last modified April 2009, http://www.judeochristianity.org/gods_presence.htm.

There is, however, one good that stands above all others and that is unconditional even on our human level:

> There is but one Absolute Good and that is God, and is beyond human understanding. We don't have the wisdom to make judgments of goodness with absolute certainty. Our sense of goodness is fallible and tinged with ambiguity. But there is one good accessible to human beings, which appears free of any conditions. It is not unconditional love but *non-self-interested love*.[40]

"Non-self-interested love" is related to the form of love known as *agape* but has a more specific focus. Judeochristianity defines non-self-interested love as *the awareness of the individuality of others,* and this is the central idea throughout the book *Judeochristianity.* The idea behind it is that when we become truly aware of the individuality of the other—the person's God-given uniqueness in all its specific qualities, which lies beyond our prejudices or what good or bad that person might do for us—then loving attitudes become possible and even natural.

In this sense non-self-interested love is the human equivalent of the love that characterizes God's nature. Since it is the greatest good that we can know, it must tell us something about Absolute Goodness, even though we cannot truly capture the latter conceptually or emotionally. When we realize non-self-interested love we participate in God's nature, and we feel God's presence as a response. Thus even though God is not a personal being, we can say that God knows us, answers us, and dwells with us. Tillich too speaks of "spiritual presence," but that seems rather remote from "being-itself." Judeochristianity maintains that any non-self-interested love actualized within us reflects God's nature, that symbolically God "recognizes" God's own nature working actively in us, and must therefore respond to it. We sense that response in the fulfillment of this

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[40] Gourgey, *Judeochristianity,* 325.

love and in the course that our lives take. We can actually come to a sense of direction in our lives originating in a higher and benevolent power.

All this is an occasion for gratitude. Therefore it makes sense to praise God, to give God thanks, for the goodness in creation that comes to us as a gift, to the extent that we commit ourselves to non-self-interested love. “Give thanks to the Lord, for goodness is” (Psalm 118:1).[41] It is difficult to understand how or why one ought to thank or praise “being-itself.”

Of course the question remains: God may be good, but is God in any sense omnipotent? How do we know that goodness prevails? In responding to this question Paul Tillich and Judeochristianity may have more in common.

[41] My translation, supported by the original Hebrew.

Chapter 2

Human Experience

Tillich

I think what struck me most about Tillich upon first acquaintance was his complete respect for the depth and tragedy of human experience. Tillich was profoundly changed by his own experience during World War I as a chaplain and gravedigger. No simple answers to life's problems could ever satisfy him after that.

> "Hell rages around us. It's unimaginable." Paul Tillich, 28-year-old theologian and German Army chaplain, wrote those words to his father from the trenches of World War I at the Battle of Verdun. Even amid his grim despair and breakdowns worked by "the sound of exploding shells, of weeping at open graves, of the sighs of the sick, of the moaning of the dying," Tillich remained both preacher and professor....
>
> Tillich's writings had power because in them he risked being in touch with the unrepeatable tensions of his present.[42]

There is nothing facile about Tillich. He knew that our era posed serious challenges to traditional religion, so he was not ashamed, in spite of much criticism (by some as notable as Karl Barth), to propose a theology whose orientation was apologetic, recognizing these challenges and the need to answer them. Hence his famous "method of correlation," which provides theological answers to existential questions and which forms the structure of his *Systematic Theology.* The five parts of that work are entitled "Reason and Revelation," "Being and God," "Existence and the Christ," "Life and the Spirit," and "History and the Kindgom of God." In each case the existential condition is paired with its theological response. Thus in great contrast to a theologian like Karl Barth, whose starting and ending point was divine revelation, as a

[42] Mark Kline Taylor, ed., *Paul Tillich: Theologian of the Boundaries* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 11.

true existentialist Tillich begins with human experience to find the theological response that does justice to it. The result is a theology better grounded in life as we live it, freer from circular reasoning, and better able to speak to those outside the circle of received faith.

The great question then becomes: How do we understand human experience, with all its ambiguity and tragedy, in the context of divine creation? This is the fundamental question with which any effective theology must deal. Tillich does so by situating human experience within two parallel polarities: *essence/existence* and *eternity/time.*

Essence vs. Existence. Ever since Plato these two terms have been devilishly difficult to pin down. It might be helpful to understand them in the context of our previous discussion of the divine life. For Tillich the divine life is always creating, which necessarily encompasses a process of separation and return. We can think of "essence" as the nature of the creature "before" separation. I place the word "before" within quotation marks because we are not talking about literal time, which itself is a product of creation. "Existence" is the creature's state of being within created time.

"Essence" refers to the human being as created in God's image. "Existence" refers to the experience in time and space necessary to realize what is potential in that image. We cannot literally chronicle the transition from essence to existence, but we can describe it metaphorically:

> The difficulty is that the state of essential being is not an actual stage of human development which can be known directly or indirectly. The essential nature of man is present in all stages of his development, although in existential distortion. In myth and dogma man's essential nature has been projected into the past as a history before history, symbolized as a golden age or paradise. In

> psychological terms one can interpret this state as that of "dreaming innocence."[43]

"Dreaming innocence" is a symbol of the original state of the human creation before the dawn of self-awareness and the exercise of freedom. The role of freedom is central. The human being could not be God's image without possessing freedom. Yet it is freedom that drives the human being from this "original" state to the ambiguities of existence. "The state of dreaming innocence drives beyond itself."[44] It must, because of the quality God has given us that Tillich calls *finite freedom.*

Finite freedom is the pivot upon which the transition from essence to existence turns. To understand this better, Tillich turns to the opening chapters of Genesis. "The story of Genesis, chapters 1-3, if taken as a myth, can guide our description of the transition from essential to existential being."[45] There is a lot packed into that one sentence. Those chapters contain the well-known "two accounts of creation." Tillich is right to put them together, instead of opposing them as conflicting works from separate authors, as many scholarly presentations do. Those two accounts of creation belong together. The first describes an essential world in which everything is "very good" (Genesis 1:31). The human being is in harmony with the animal world and there is no conflict. There is also very limited awareness. The second account describes the awakening of awareness. Man and woman violate God's first and only commandment, not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good *and evil.* This exercise of finite freedom makes them aware of themselves: "Then the eyes of both were opened, and

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[43] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume Two,* 33.
[44] Ibid., 34.
[45] Ibid., 31.

they knew that they were naked" (Genesis 3:7). No longer are they aware of goodness only, but of the possibility of evil as well. Their dreaming innocence has been shattered.

Throughout history Adam and Eve have been soundly condemned for this first act of disobedience. But given the quality of finite freedom, the act was inevitable.

> The tension occurs in the moment in which finite freedom becomes conscious of itself and tends to become actual. This is what could be called the moment of aroused freedom. But in the same moment a reaction starts, coming from the essential unity of freedom and destiny. Dreaming innocence wants to preserve itself. This reaction is symbolized in the biblical story as the divine prohibition against actualizing one's potential freedom and against acquiring knowledge and power. Man is caught between the desire to actualize his freedom and the demand to preserve his dreaming innocence. In the power of his finite freedom, he decides for actualization.[46]

The exercise of God-given freedom is what propels the human being from essence to existence. Paradoxically, had the human being not exercised that freedom, which scripture counts as a violation of God's will, then God's creation of the human in God's own image would have been for naught. Again, the story is not meant to be taken literally as a sequence of events in time. That is why Tillich calls it a "myth": not to trivialize it but to emphasize its power in describing something fundamental that cannot be captured literally. The dual creation myth brings us an insight into the human being's belonging to something higher and essentially good in spite of being subject to the ambiguities and tragedies of existence.

Thus the Fall from essential being, from original creation, is inevitably part of creation itself. The word that most aptly describes the relation of existence to essence is *estrangement,* and this idea surfaces repeatedly in Tillich's writings. Because of our

[46] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume Two,* 35.

freedom and the possibility of sin we are estranged from each other and estranged from God.

> The motif of the myth of the transcendent Fall is the tragic-universal character of existence. The meaning of the myth is that the very constitution of existence implies the transition from essence to existence. The individual act of existential estrangement is not the isolated act of an isolated individual; it is an act of freedom which is imbedded, nevertheless, in the universal destiny of existence.[47]

There can be no creation without estrangement. "The state of existence is the state of estrangement. Man is estranged from the ground of his being, from other beings, and from himself."[48] And so we have the stark characterization of existence/estrangement in Genesis 3:

> *Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.* (Genesis 3:17-19)

We have come a long way from the idyllic depiction in Genesis 1.

Eternity vs. time. This second polarity is really identical to the first, but seen from a different perspective. This perspective brings us closer to the heart of reality itself. For reality is not all we see with our eyes and hear with our ears. There is an unseen reality to which we also belong, and which is even more decisive in shaping our being.

The discussion of the meaning of eternity in the first volume of *Systematic Theology* is obscure, telling us more what eternity is not than what it is. A concept so central to Tillich's theology deserves a better and clearer statement, and Tillich indeed provides one in his sermon entitled "We Live in Two Orders."

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[47] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume Two,* 38.
[48] Ibid., 44.

In this sermon Tillich calls eternity an "order of being." We live in two orders: "The human order, the order of history, is primarily the order of growing and dying."[49] The other order, the divine order, is "something infinite, in an order which is not transitory, not self-destructive, not tragic, but eternal, holy, and blessed."[50] Life in a physical body within the limitations of time is not all there is. Beyond that is a created order symbolized by the first chapter of Genesis, in which estrangement is overcome and separations are reconciled. Our great source of hope is that these two orders, time and eternity, are not separate from each other. "The two orders, the historical and the eternal, although they can never become the same, are within each other. The historical order is not separated from the eternal order."[51] "The eternal is not a future state of things. It is always present, not only in man (who is aware of it), but also in everything that has being within the whole of being."[52] Eternity is always with us, we are always part of it, and every so often it "breaks through" our experience in time and we have an intimation of an enduring reality beyond time that offers salvation.

> What is new in the prophets and in Christianity, beyond all paganism, old and new, is that the eternal order reveals itself in the historical order. The suffering servant of God and the enemies because of whom he suffers, the Man on the Cross and those who fainted under the Cross, the exiled and persecuted in all periods of history, have all transformed history. The strong in history fall; the strength of each of us is taken from us. But those who seem weak in history finally shape history, because they are bound to the eternal order. We are not a lost generation because we are a suffering, destroyed generation. Each of us belongs to the eternal order.[53]

In a sermon entitled "The Eternal Now" Tillich goes into greater detail. He speaks of eternity as a dimension beyond time, which Christ represents and reveals to us.

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[49] Tillich, *Shaking of the Foundations*, 18.
[50] Ibid., 22.
[51] Ibid., 23.
[52] Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume Three* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 400.
[53] Tillich, *Shaking of the Foundations,* 23.

> We ask about life after death, yet seldom do we ask about our being before birth. But is it possible to do one without the other? The fourth gospel does not think so. When it speaks of the eternity of the Christ, it does not only point to his return to eternity, but also to his coming *from* eternity. "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I *am."* He comes from another dimension than that in which the past lies. Those to whom he speaks misunderstand him because they think of the historical past. They believe that he makes himself hundreds of years old and they rightly take offense at this absurdity. Yet he does not say, "I *was*" before Abraham; but he says, "I *am*" before Abraham was. He speaks of his beginning out of eternity. And this is the beginning of everything that is.[54]

The existence of Christ is one way we can know about eternity, and we will look at this more closely in the next section. Christ came to give us hope in this unseen but omnipresent dimension of reality, which he called the "Kingdom of God" or "Kingdom of heaven." The parables of Jesus illustrate the elusiveness of this Kingdom, to which we are nevertheless always invited. Our experience of the Kingdom of God in this life must necessarily be "fragmentary," a word Tillich often uses to describe our imperfect and intermittent awareness of it.

> Every moment of time reaches into the eternal. It is the eternal that stops the flux of time for us. It is the eternal "now" which provides for us a temporal "now." We live so long as "it is still today"—in the words of the letter to the Hebrews. Not everybody, and nobody all the time, is aware of this "eternal now" in the temporal "now." But sometimes it breaks powerfully into our consciousness and gives us the certainty of the eternal, of a dimension of time which cuts into time and gives us our time.[55]

I find this idea of eternity "breaking into" our experience at special moments very honest and true to life. I remember having disagreements with people, some of them from Eastern traditions, who belittled this notion and maintained that it is possible to live in this blessed state (sometimes called "enlightenment") all the time, and not only in moments of grace. I believe these people are deceiving themselves, and often that was observable. We cannot possess the Kingdom of God in this life. As Tillich says, human

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[54] Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), 126-27.
[55] Ibid., 131.

knowledge of it is necessarily fragmentary. Yet it is still available to us in every present moment, giving us hope that the “ambiguities” (Tillich’s term for the imperfections and sufferings) of human experience are ultimately redeemed.

Judeochristianity

Tillich's essay on the "two orders" was one of the first of his writings that I read. It made an immediate impression on me. It seemed to explain how one can have faith and doubt, confidence in God and fear of suffering at the same time. For me, Tillich's presentation of eternity was formative. He described it exactly the way I experienced it: as a transcendent reality "breaking into" the world of pain and problems with which I was mostly acquainted.

Since we live in both time and eternity, it should not surprise us that our nature reflects characteristics of each. Traditional Jewish theology recognizes two different natures within us, called *yetzer ha-tob* and *yetzer ha-ra',* which literally mean "good inclination" and "evil inclination." There is no "original sin" or "total depravity"; the human being is created with a tendency towards either or both directions. Sometimes the *yetzer ha-ra'* refers to our physical or animal nature, and specifically to the sexual impulse. And in fact this inclination is not condemned but accepted as a created part of us. The rabbis of the Talmud even said that *yetzer ha-ra' tob meod,* "the 'evil' inclination is very good!" The midrash *Bereshit Rabbah* (9:7) comments on Genesis 1:31, "God saw everything that [God] had made, and indeed, it was very good":

> Nahman said in R. Samuel's name: Behold, it was *very good* refers to the Good Desire *[yetzer ha-tob];* and behold, it was *very good,* to the Evil Desire *[yetzer ha-ra']*. Can then the Evil Desire be very good? That would be extraordinary! But for the Evil Desire, however, no man would build a house, take a wife and beget children.[56]

[56] Freedman, H. and Maurice Simon, ed. and trans., *Midrash Rabbah* (London: Soncino Press), 68.

Recognizing that we have two natures does not mean we must accept one and reject or try to suppress the other. It just means recognizing that our existence has both spiritual and temporal characteristics. Putting it this way sometimes leaves one open to the charge of "dualism," which has become a dirty word in philosophical circles. However, it cannot be denied that these two natures sometimes really are in conflict. Freud recognized a "herd instinct," a tendency humans have in common with the animal kingdom:

> It might be said that the intense emotional ties which we observe in groups are quite sufficient to explain one of their characteristics—the lack of independence and initiative in their members, the similarity in the reactions of all of them, their reduction, so to speak, to the level of group individuals. But if we look at it as a whole, a group shows us more than this. Some of its features—the weakness of intellectual ability, the lack of emotional restraint, the incapacity for moderation and delay, the inclination to exceed every limit in the expression of emotion and to work it off completely in the form of action—these and similar features, which we find so impressively described in Le Bon, show an unmistakable picture of a regression of mental activity to an earlier stage such as we are not surprised to find among savages or children.[57]

Of course group identification has its positive side, as it produces cultural diversity, but it is also the one human quality most responsible for large-scale conflict and war. This is just one of the many ambiguities of human existence. One of Jesus's core teachings, from the Sermon on the Mount to the Good Samaritan, was the need to overcome this tendency to separate ourselves into groups and cultivate instead a love without distinction.

Another good example of this ambiguity is our sexual impulse. The sexual impulse naturally tends to erase the individuality of the other. At first the body is all that it sees. How many examples can one recount of marriages founded on physical

[57] Freud, Sigmund, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego,* trans James Strachey (New York: Liveright, 1959), 62.

attraction that end in disaster? Even worse are those times when sexual desire fuses with aggression and becomes violation. And yet sexual communion can become one of the deepest spiritual experiences we can know in this life, if it is founded on recognition of the individual. Our sexuality is a true "Jacob's ladder," with its roots in the earth yet the possibility of reaching into heaven.

It is in this context that I understand Jesus's vexing message "that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28). Taken literally, it would mean that almost all of us (men anyway) are going to hell. I cannot believe Jesus would have condemned us simply for the way we were created. I believe an apt paraphrase of Jesus's message would be: "Guard yourself against the natural tendency to separate a woman's spirit from her body." There are times when our two natures, the spiritual and the animal, really can be at war with each other. No one described this more powerfully than Paul in Romans 7.

Judeochristianity describes our two natures like this:

> The "body," or our physical nature, is a symbol of what we might call the psychological self. This is what Paul means by "flesh": not the literal, physical body, but the human self with its desires, its appetites, and its passions. It is our human sense of identity. And it is very fragile.[58]

On the other hand,

> Our individuality coincides with our spiritual nature. The animal nature is present as a catalyst, to help us learn, and to help us express that individuality. But the individuality itself is the soul, the spiritual nature we possess even before entering human form, and the only nature that survives into eternity.[59]

[58] Gourgey, *Judeochristianity,* 26.
[59] Ibid., 34.

Dualism is overcome when the two natures work together harmoniously, and when both are cherished. It would be a mistake to take a puritanical view that would attempt to suppress our earthly nature while we are still in fact creatures of the earth.

> While we are here on earth, we are torn between these two possible directions, these two dimensions of life. Through our earthly nature we love pleasure and amusement, but through our spiritual nature we seek something more lasting. A good life on earth consists of a healthy balance of both. Indulging our earthly nature to the neglect of the spiritual leads to emptiness, chasing shadows that never end and lead nowhere. But trying to live only in our spiritual nature may tempt us to cut ourselves off from others, from the daily pleasures and annoyances of family life and other personal interaction. That too is emptiness, since in our earthly life the spiritual is fulfilled through involvement with the world.[60]

We belong to both time and eternity, and it is important not to deny either. Yet naturalism, the belief that only physical laws of nature operate in the world, has become the predominant philosophical attitude of our time. Naturalism, unfortunately, ignores the fact that we have ways of knowing beyond the physical senses. Naturalism cannot see beyond the temporal self, but spiritual vision can, and deep in our hearts we know it.

> Beyond this [temporal] self there is not nothing. There is the *individuality*, the unique essence of each one of us, which belongs to eternity, which we can perceive through spiritual sense, and whose awareness naturally stimulates the response of love.[61]

At this point we arrive at a key difference between Tillich's theology and Judeochristianity. For Tillich, the fall from essence to existence rests on the human being's "finite freedom." For Judeochristianity, the key factor is *awareness.* The world was not created for the sake of freedom but for love, which is a higher value and which encompasses freedom. Freedom is properly the servant of love: "Love cannot exist

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[60] Gourgey, *Judeochristianity,* 44.
[61] Ibid.*,* 166.

without the presence of individuals who are separate and independent but capable of seeing and cherishing each other."[62] And the most significant prerequisite for love is awareness—not just the awareness of the physical senses, but of our spiritual senses as well, which most importantly include our sense of goodness.

The necessity of awareness for the realization of love can explain the presence of the temporal world, the world of human experience.

> I always used to wonder, Why did God create the dinosaurs? Dinosaurs had no spiritual awareness that we know of; they neither worshiped God nor produced great art or literature. Yet God must have considered them important, because the length of time humans have existed is but a drop compared to the millions of years that dinosaurs dominated the earth. Nevertheless, we no longer hear from the dinosaurs.
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> Perhaps God created the dinosaurs, and all pre-human creatures, to establish that this is an animal world. This is not our home. We were temporarily transplanted here, to learn what a spiritual entity can learn only in an animal world. It is actually quite ingenious. Imagine God wondering how the greatest value of all, love, could be learned and revealed. Love means little in a world of only God and angels. Neither God nor angels need anything. They do not suffer.
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> So it is reported that after having created the animals God told the angels, "Let us make man in our image" (Genesis 1:26). Let us add to the animal kingdom a spiritual being, the human being, so that through this creature's struggle with this difficult animal nature love will emerge. Love can be learned only where there is need. In the physical world there is need, there is want, there is pain and suffering. Compassion is love responding to suffering; it cannot exist in a world without suffering. Suffering shakes people out of their sleeping comfort. In a world free of suffering, the awareness that is love's essence could never develop. And only in an animal world can suffering exist.[63]

Genuine love is built not on want or on need but on *awareness.* As we have previously noted, Judeochristianity defines the highest form of love, called *non-self-interested love,* in terms of awareness: "Love is the awareness of the individuality of others."[64] Non-self-interested love is the core concept at the heart of Judeochristianity. It is the highest good, and since God is Absolute Goodness, it is the value that most

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[62] Gourgey, *Judeochristianity,* 165.
[63] Ibid.*,* 31-32.
[64] Ibid., 226.

reflects God's nature and reveals it to us here on earth. Judeochristianity's emphasis on the *necessity of awareness* rather than the endowment of finite freedom in the creation of the temporal world has profound implications for the question of theodicy, which we will discuss later on.

So we have established the dual nature of the human being, and the possibility of bridging our two natures through spiritual sense. We possess this dual nature because as human beings we participate in both time and eternity. The dimension of time hardly needs description. We all know it well. It is characterized by dualities (love/hate, joy/sorrow, pleasure/pain, success/failure) and by impermanence, imperfections, and suffering. Eternity is different.

> The "kingdom of God" is the biblical symbol for what we have elsewhere called "eternity." It is the intangible but real dimension of existence that is the source of life's meaning. It is all that endures even after the material world has passed away. We can grasp the eternal through our sense of goodness. Acts and expressions of goodness reverberate; they move far beyond their point of origin and even signal to us a different world, where all that has true value is not lost but endures.[65]

In our current state of estrangement (as Tillich would put it), the temporal world with all its ambiguities is constantly with us, while the Kingdom of God may seem elusive. Nevertheless we belong to that kingdom and have access to it through prayer. Judeochristianity understands prayer as "the endeavor to bring ourselves into the awareness of eternal life."[66] Through prayer we can approach the mystery of the eternal, by bringing ourselves closer to the goodness that is God's nature.

So what we may at first experience as a division within ourselves between our animal and spiritual natures ultimately becomes a profound source of hope. Eternity is

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[65] Gourgey, *Judeochristianity,* 107.
[66] Ibid., 108.

always within us (Luke 17:21), waiting for our return, a refuge and guide in times of trouble and times of joy.

Chapter 3

Christ

Tillich

Much has been written about Tillich's Christology that would leave the average reader utterly confused. Yet if we understand the previously described foundation of essence/existence and eternity/time, everything falls into place and the meaning of the Christ becomes powerfully clear.

Jesus as the Christ is absolutely central to Tillich's theology. Tillich describes the Christ event with two key phrases: "final revelation" and "New Being."

The "final revelation" is the decisive central point in the history of revelation. "The final revelation divides the history of revelation into a period of preparation and a period of reception."[67] In this context the word "final" does not mean "last." It is better understood as "ultimate" or "definitive." Tillich acknowledges that revelation continues in the history of the church. Nevertheless,

> Christianity claims to be based on the revelation in Jesus as the Christ as the final revelation.... There can be no revelation in the history of the church whose point of reference is not Jesus as the Christ. If another point of reference is sought or accepted, the Christian church has lost its foundation. But final revelation means more than the last genuine revelation. It means the decisive, fulfilling, unsurpassable revelation, that which is the criterion of all the others. This is the Christian claim, and this is the basis of a Christian theology.[68]

Two things make Jesus as the Christ the final revelation: *self-sacrifice* and *unity with God.*

The first and basic answer theology must give to the question of the finality of the revelation in Jesus as the Christ is the following: a revelation is final if it has the power

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[67] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One,* 138.
[68] Ibid., 132-33.

of negating itself without losing itself.... He who is the bearer of the final revelation must surrender his finitude—not only his life but also his finite power and knowledge and perfection. In doing so, he affirms that he is the bearer of final revelation (the "Son of God" in classical terms). He becomes completely transparent to the mystery he reveals.[69]

These themes recur frequently in Tillich's writing. The cross is a perfect symbol for Christianity because it is self-negating; it prevents the religion itself from becoming an idolatrous object and leaves room for the divine mystery. And Jesus as the Christ became the bearer of revelation because he was *transparent* to the One who sent him. Quoting John 12:44, Tillich adds emphasis to bring out its meaning: "He who believes in me does not believe in *me* but in him who sent me."[70] This one verse encapsulates both Jesus's self-negation and his transparency to God. Jesus declares that he, the man Jesus, is not the issue, but only God as seen through him. Jesus sacrifices what is human in him in order to point to a higher divine reality. And the ultimate sacrifice Jesus made was on the cross.

> The acceptance of the cross, both during his life and at the end of it, is the decisive test of his unity with God, of his complete transparency to the ground of being.... This sacrifice is the end of all attempts to impose him, as a finite being, on other finite beings. It is the end of Jesusology. Jesus of Nazareth is the medium of the final revelation because he sacrifices himself completely to Jesus as the Christ. He not only sacrifices his life, as many martyrs and many ordinary people have done, but he also sacrifices everything in him and of him which could bring people to him as an "overwhelming personality" instead of bringing them to that in him which is greater than he and they.[71]

But how can Jesus claim to be the revealer of God? Tillich's phrasing points toward an answer. Tillich does not speak of "Jesus Christ," as though "Christ" were simply a surname for "Jesus," but of "Jesus *as* the Christ." "Jesus Christ" is therefore

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[69] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One,* 133.
[70] Paul Tillich, *The New Being* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), 97; cf. Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One,* 136.
[71] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One,* 136.

not a name but a *statement.* It means that Jesus *is* in fact the Christ, that it is not Jesus the man but Jesus *as* the Christ who possesses the power of revelation.

Clearly everything turns on the meaning of the word *Christ.* The literal meaning of "anointed one" is well known, but Tillich takes it much farther. We are approaching the point at which Christ the anointed one, the Messiah, becomes the bearer of the *New Being*.

> Christianity is the message of the New Creation, the New Being, the New Reality which has appeared with the appearance of Jesus who for this reason, and just for this reason, is called the Christ.[72]
>
> This is the fundamental assertion of Christianity.
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> Wherever the assertion of Jesus is the Christ is maintained, there is the Christian message; wherever this assertion is denied, the Christian message is not affirmed. Christianity was born, not with the birth of the man who is called "Jesus," but in the moment in which one of his followers was driven to say to him, "Thou art the Christ."[73]

We now need to understand what "Christ" means for Tillich. Tillich defines the Christ as "the manifestation of the New Being in time and space." This is not really helpful unless we understand what Tillich means by "New Being." And here we come to the heart of Tillich's Christology. The following passage could well be considered the centerpiece of Tillich's entire Systematic Theology:

> *New Being is essential being under the conditions of existence*, conquering the gap between essence and existence. For the same idea Paul uses the term "new creature," calling those who are "in" Christ "new creatures." "In" is the preposition of participation; he who participates in the newness of being which is in Christ has become a new creature. It is a creative act by which this happens. Inasmuch as Jesus as the Christ is a creation of the divine Spirit, according to Synoptic theology, so is he who participates in the Christ made into a new creature by the Spirit. The estrangement of his existential from his essential being is conquered in principle, i.e., in power and as a beginning. The term "New Being," as used here, points directly to the cleavage between

[72] Tillich, *New Being,* 15.
[73] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume Two,* 97.

> essential and existential being—and is the restorative principle of the whole of this theological system. The New Being is new in so far as it is the undistorted manifestation of essential being within and under the conditions of existence.[74]

We now have enough foundation to piece together the profound implications of this statement. "God made human beings straightforward, but they have devised many schemes" (Ecclesiastes 7:29)—that in a sentence is the difference between essence and existence. God created human beings pure, in God's own image, but through the exercise of finite freedom they have brought corruption and suffering on themselves. That is the "fall," and the origin of existential estrangement. But Jesus was "transparent" to God's nature—as a human being, and under the conditions of human limitation, *he revealed in his being the nature of God,* the true image of God that is obscured in the rest of us. He showed us our essential being, the purity of God's creation. And in doing so he gave us the presence of eternity in the midst of our temporal existence. And that is indeed good news, news of salvation.

It is not what Jesus did but what he was that makes him the bearer of the New Being. "It is his being that makes him the Christ because his being has the quality of the New Being beyond the split of essential and existential being."[75] The New Being finds *expression* in Jesus through his words, his deeds, and his suffering. "Only by taking suffering and death upon himself could Jesus be the Christ, because only in this way could he participate completely in existence and conquer every force of estrangement which tried to dissolve his unity with God."[76] These things, his words and deeds, express the New Being in Jesus, but they do not make him its bearer, for then he would be just another great teacher of morals. It is in the *being* of Jesus that the New Being is

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[74] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume Two,* 118-19 (emphasis added).
[75] Ibid., 121.
[76] Ibid., 123.

revealed, with its message of hope and reconciliation. This is what it means to say that Jesus is the Christ.

Clearly Jesus was no ordinary person. But neither is what he was remote and inaccessible to us. Jesus revealed to us our own true nature and calling. “He does not represent man to God but shows what God wants man to be. He represents to those who live under the conditions of existence what man essentially is and therefore ought to be under these conditions.”[77]

Does Jesus’s special role mean he was divine? Tillich does not address this question directly, but he does touch upon it in a discussion of the meaning of incarnation.

> Who is the subject of incarnation? If the answer is “God,” one often continues by saying that “God has become man” and that this is the paradox of the Christian message, but the assertion that “God has become man” is not a paradoxical but a nonsensical statement. It is a combination of words which makes sense only if it is not meant to mean what the words say. The word “God” points to ultimate reality, and even the most consistent Scotists had to admit that the only thing God cannot do is to cease to be God. But that is just what the assertion “God has become man” means.[78]

God is unlimited, infinite; man is limited, finite. If God were to become man, either God would no longer possess the characteristics of God, or the man that God became would not be man. Nor can we speak of a divine being who becomes man, because that would take us into polytheism. What then can incarnation possibly mean?

> A modifying interpretation of the term “Incarnation” would have to follow the Johannine statement that the “Logos became flesh.” “Logos” is the principle of the divine self-manifestation in God as well as in the universe, in nature as well as in history. “Flesh” does not mean a material substance but stands for historical existence. And “became” points to the paradox of God participating in that which did not receive him and in that which is estranged from him. This is not a myth of transmutation but the assertion that God is manifest in a personal life-process as

[77] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume Two*, 93.
[78] Ibid., 94.

> a saving participant in the human predicament. If "Incarnation" is understood in this qualifying way, then the Christian paradox can be expressed by this term. But perhaps this is an unwise course, since it is practically impossible to protect the concept from superstitious connotations.[79]

Tillich has said this before in different words: Jesus was "transparent" to God; God's nature shines through him. But God does not literally become him. Tillich rejects such personalistic and anthropomorphic pictures of God.

For Tillich, Christ is not God literally walking on earth, but rather the one who in his being shows us our *essence,* what we are meant to be, and by doing so gives us the presence of the *eternal,* the only thing that saves us from the tribulations of human existence. "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17). We can find our own essence by seeing it reflected in Christ and praying to be conformed to its image. That is the overcoming of our estrangement.

[79] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume Two,* 95.

Judeochristianity

Judeochristianity does not offer a formal Christology. Its intention is to make Jesus accessible to everyone, whether Christian, Jew, or nonbeliever. Over the centuries many formal Christologies amounted to not much more than speculation imposed on the biblical text, with the effect of obscuring and distracting from Jesus's message. Therefore Principle #6 of Judeochristianity states:

> Judeochristianity is a way of seeing both Judaism and Christianity that emphasizes the continuity between these two traditions. It makes no commitment to either Jewish or Christian religious doctrine or practice. It does not ask people to give up their religious practice or to adopt a new one. All are invited, whether they believe Jesus to be the Son of God, the Messiah, the last of the Hebrew prophets, or are perhaps wondering just who Jesus was and what makes him important. Christians need not suspend their belief in Jesus's divinity, nor need Jews accept this belief, in order to appreciate and benefit from this approach. Judeochristianity is a unifying approach that accepts Jews, Christians, and others exactly where they are.[80]

As the last of the Hebrew prophets, Jesus's main function was to extend the Covenant originally promised to Jews, and to tell the world that all are included without distinction. Jesus carried forward many of the themes important to his prophetic forebears: the demand for social justice, the condemnation of religious hypocrisy, the message that God's Covenant cannot be broken and that God never leaves us. To be understood properly Jesus must be seen in this context. The result is a universalization of the Covenant, as Principle #5 states.

> The New Testament represents the continuation and culmination of Hebrew prophecy. Through Jesus's life and teachings we learn that God's intimate relationship with human beings extends to every individual member of every nation on earth. It was Jesus's prophetic vocation to bring this message to the world. The New Testament extends the Hebrew covenant to all of humanity.[81]

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[80] Gourgey, *Judeochristianity,* xxvi-xxvii.
[81] Ibid.*,* xxvi.

Unfortunately, nearly two millennia of Christian hostility towards Jews have made Jesus all but inaccessible to most of the Jewish community. Judeochristianity endeavors to correct this without threatening the bond between Jews and Judaism. It is a difficult task because the association of Jesus with Christian persecution of Jews is so strong in the minds of many Jews that finding an audience is a formidable challenge. The matter is made much worse by groups like Jews for Jesus or other "Messianic Christians," which package traditional Christian intolerance in pseudo-Jewish form. It is therefore nearly impossible for a Jew to speak sympathetically of Jesus without being associated with these groups. Facing the Christian world today, many Jews (and I count myself as one of them) feel squeezed between evangelical Christians who support Israel but only for their own theological purposes and who practice a Christianity that still does not accept Jews as equals, and liberal Protestants who are more religiously tolerant but often anti-Israel to the extent of refusing to recognize the nuances of the Middle East conflict and the fact that neither side has a corner on morality and justice. The tragedy is the alienation of Jews from their own greatest prophet—and in writing this sentence, I am fully aware that I need to guard against unwanted but inevitable associations with the attitude "If only Jews would come to Christ they would be saved," an abhorrent sentiment that has literally cost millions of lives.

Jesus lived as a Jew and practiced as a Jew, and Jews have a right to claim him as one of their own, and to be proud of a heritage that could produce such a pivotal figure with a saving message for humanity. Jesus was both a Jewish and a universal prophet, was way ahead of our time as well as his own, and possessed a vocation the world cannot afford to ignore. This is what Judeochristianity wishes to emphasize,

cutting through layers of theological obscurantism to arrive at the message and being of Jesus with the power to heal the world.

One day at the hospice where I worked as a music therapist, a young, very anxious Jewish woman approached me. She knew she was dying, and she wanted to know about Jesus. Something about Jesus drew her to him, but when she turned to the churches to find out more about him she found herself condemned because of her Jewish beliefs. She was desperate to find a source of information about Jesus that did not judge her, so she asked me to provide her with one.

I honestly could not think of anything suitable, so that night I wrote an essay about Jesus just for her, which became chapter 2 of *Judeochristianity.* Entitled "Who is Jesus," it tells briefly of Jesus's life and significance without the theological trappings. The story goes like this:

Jesus was first a Jew and cannot be understood apart from the history of the Jewish search for God. Abraham discovered the Covenant, a reciprocal relationship between God and human beings whose message is that God makes a real difference in our lives. A system of laws evolved to ensure adherence to the Covenant. Jesus did not abolish those laws, but he distilled them to their barest essence: if we can fulfill the commandment to love, we have fulfilled the law. But not just any love, because most human love is rooted in self-interest. Jesus was quite explicit: "if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?" (Matthew 5:46). Love not only those who love you back, but those who cannot give you anything back. Love the stranger (Deuteronomy 10:19). Practice *non-self-interested love.* Everything in the law is rightfully intended towards that end, and that is how to do God's will.

Jesus himself had to learn this. He did not understand it at first. Initially he instructed his disciples to reach out only to Jews (Matthew 10:5-6). But it took a Gentile woman to show him how limited his view had been. A Canaanite woman came to Jesus asking him to heal her daughter. Because she was not Jewish Jesus at first treated her with contempt, even comparing her to a dog (Matthew 15:24,26). But she persisted in humility and in faith, and Jesus found himself compelled to view her as a human being. He became *aware* of her, loved her, and granted her request. And ever since then his life and his teaching changed.

In this way Jesus discovered his great vocation, which was to take the Covenant he inherited from Abraham and the prophets who followed and to extend that Covenant to all of humanity. Jesus showed us that God's love is universal, and since we are God's image our love too should not discriminate on the basis of personal ties and self-interest. This is how Jesus became the fulfillment of Hebrew prophecy.

Continuing our explanation, we might ask whether Judeochristianity provides answers to these commonly asked questions about Jesus: Was Jesus the Messiah? Was he God?

To the first question we can respond that considering Jesus the Messiah is more than reasonable. The most common objection to this idea is that the Messiah was supposed to change the world, and the world has not really changed since Jesus. We still have conflicts and wars, holocausts and atrocities on an unprecedented scale. But even in Jewish tradition we can find a possible response to this anomaly.

> The Talmud *(Sanhedrin* 98a) tells the story of Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, who went out in search of the Messiah. He found the Prophet Elijah and asked, "When will the Messiah come?" Elijah told him to find the Messiah and ask him.

> So Rabbi Joshua found the Messiah and asked him, "When are you coming?" The Messiah replied, "Today."
>
> Dejected, Rabbi Joshua went back to Elijah and told him, "I found the Messiah and he lied to me. He said he was coming today."
>
> Elijah responded: "You didn't catch the whole thing. He said: 'Today—if you listen to his voice!' (Psalm 95:7)."
>
> There is much wisdom in this rabbinic teaching. Not even the Messiah can change the world without our cooperation. We cannot expect that of him. What we can expect, however, is at least that he will show us how to do it.
>
> And this is what Jesus has done. By teaching and demonstrating non-self-interested love as the culmination of the prophetic message, he gave us the blueprint for changing the world. Even if like some Jews we are still waiting for the Messiah, or like some Christians we are waiting for Jesus's second coming, there is nothing he could tell us or do for us that he has not already done. It's as if those still waiting for the completion of the Messianic task are, as were their first-century counterparts, expecting precisely the type of Messiah-conqueror that Jesus showed he could not be. If we are waiting for the world to change miraculously while we just sit by and watch, it isn't going to happen. But if all of us, or even sufficient numbers of us, took seriously this teaching of non-self-interested love and put it into practice, we would see the world change towards a truly Messianic era.[82]

What more could we possibly expect of the Messiah than this?

The question of Jesus's divinity is of course controversial. As stated earlier, the intention of Judeochristianity is to speak to people without distinction of particular religious belief. I do have my own views on the matter, resulting from a personal religious experience. It is not a formal part of Judeochristianity and not described in my book but in a website article, "Jesus and the Christ Angel."[83] Since it does bear on Christology I will summarize it briefly.

Jesus's existence represents a paradox. At least in the Synoptic Gospels it appears clear that Jesus is not equated with God (and even in John the question is ambiguous; see the article for specific references). But if Jesus was just an ordinary

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[82] Charles Gourgey, "Jesus vs. Jews for Jesus: A Statement on Religious Tolerance," last modified July 2012, http://www.judeochristianity.org/jews_for_jesus.htm.

[83] Charles Gourgey, "Jesus and the Christ Angel," last modified June 2009, http://www.judeochristianity.org/jesus_and_the_christ_angel.htm.

human being, how to explain the tremendous wisdom and spiritual maturity he showed at such a young age? It is true that some consider Jesus just another great teacher of morals, but he was far more than that. He added significantly to the prophetic legacy by bringing out the meaning of *non-self-interested love,* a revolutionary idea even in our own time, and by calling on us to practice it. So what can we say about Jesus's nature that explains his profound difference from other human beings?

I would agree with the statement of Tillich quoted above (p. 34) to the effect that God is not a person, and so the phrase "God became man" is incoherent. To understand Jesus we must take a different route.

Both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament talk about angels. Descriptions of angels vary, and what they are is not very clear. The word itself means "messenger." Angels are messengers of God. Whether or not they are actual beings is a matter of personal belief or experience, since it cannot be demonstrated, But at the very least, "angel" is a symbol pointing towards a spiritual presence. (Tillich talks a lot about "spiritual presence" in the third volume of his *Systematic Theology,* which we will consider in a later section.)

Angels are not an exclusively biblical phenomenon. The reality towards which angels point applies now as much as to any other time. We just use different language to describe it.

> And so throughout the Bible we encounter appearances of God's messengers, bearing news or a word about the destiny of the people or of specific individuals. Why don't we see them today? Perhaps we do sense them, but not in ways we might expect. Looking back on the course our lives have taken, we might experience that what seemed to be random events now appear to have had a pattern leading us to a certain destiny. Or we might even have an intimation about a future calling, a sense that we are being led towards something even greater than what we have known. We might not see or hear

> anything, yet have a sense of presence, of something beyond ourselves guiding and giving our lives meaning. If we have had such experiences, we may think of them as indicating an angelic presence, a messenger from the eternal helping us make sense of our temporal existence.[84]

In this understanding, angels can make as much sense to us now as in biblical times.

Now in moments when we are most blessed we may sense ourselves in the presence of the greatest angel of all.

> There is one angel higher and purer than all the others. That is the angelic presence of pure love itself. It is beyond any word about any specific destiny that any particular angel may carry. We may be graced to sense this angel's traces, when we experience ourselves in the presence of a love that knows and accepts us and demands nothing in return.[85]

This is the essence of God, as pure and absolute love, as a spiritual presence accompanying us here on earth. It was this divine essence working through Jesus that healed those with whom he came in contact. Feeling, really *knowing* themselves in the presence of this totally accepting love, the broken were made whole again.

This angel can be given a special name. It can be called the "Christ Angel." "The Christ Angel is God's essence of love and goodness, and God's messenger bringing that essence to us in a way that can reach us through our human frailty and become real to us."[86]

A prophet is one who is grasped by a spiritual presence carrying a message from the eternal. Another way of saying this is that a prophet is one who hears the voice of an angel. It is not a literal auditory "hearing" but rather an inner sense that the source is beyond and greater than the speaker, proven by the message's healing character.

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[84] Gourgey, "Jesus and the Christ Angel."
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid.

Prophets receive their vocation from birth. “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations” (Jeremiah 1:5). A prophet has the choice to refuse the vocation. Jonah tried to do so, before he truly understood what it meant.

Jesus was special among the prophets, because the angel who spoke to Jesus was none other than the Christ Angel. Jesus allowed himself to become its instrument, symbolized as “the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him” (Matthew 3:16). From this moment Jesus received the Christ Angel into his spirit and allowed it to speak through him. And in this way we can understand the famous “I am” passages in John’s Gospel, as the Christ Angel, the presence of pure love, speaking through Jesus: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him” (John 14:6-7). What this passage is really saying is that one can only know God by knowing love; there is no other way. And by seeing the Christ Angel working through Jesus, one has in fact seen God.

In all this Jesus never ceases to be human. Sometimes we do hear Jesus’s human voice, as when in Gethsemane he says he is afraid, or when on the cross he asks why God has abandoned him. (I take that cry of abandonment very seriously; if Jesus had meant to quote the last verse of Psalm 22 instead of the first, he would have done so.) But even on the cross the Christ Angel is working, for as Paul tells us, God’s love is suffering love, and endures all things (1 Corinthians 13:7).

Because Jesus demonstrated the presence of unflinching love even in the worst suffering, he proved the power of love and by doing so established the foundation of faith. It is this to which we now turn.

Chapter 4

Faith

Tillich

In his introduction to *Dynamics of Faith* Tillich states that the word "faith" has been so abused that it has almost become unusable.[87] Nevertheless, the word is too important to drop from our vocabulary. Nothing else can describe the relationship between the human being and the reality towards which faith points.

For Tillich, "faith is the state of being ultimately concerned."[88] It is a "centered act," involving the complete commitment of one's total personality. "Faith is a total and centered act of the personal self, the act of unconditional, infinite and ultimate concern."[89] The source of faith is an awareness of a reality greater than ourselves. "Man is driven toward faith by his awareness of the infinite to which he belongs, but which he does not own like a possession."[90] It is also important to note that for Tillich faith is a *state* and not a *belief.* Tillich is quite emphatic about this.

> There are few words in the language of religion which cry for as much semantic purging as the word "faith." It is continually being confused with belief in something for which there is no evidence, or in something intrinsically unbelievable, or in absurdities and nonsense. It is extremely difficult to remove these distorting connotations from the genuine meaning of faith....
>
> Faith must be defined both formally and materially. The formal definition is valid for every kind of faith in all religions and cultures. Faith, formally or generally defined, is the state of being grasped by that toward which self-transcendence aspires, the ultimate in being and meaning. In a short formula, one can say that faith is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern.[91]

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[87] Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith,* ix.
[88] Ïbid., 1.
[89] Ibid., 8.
[90] Ibid., 9.
[91] Tillish, *Systematic Theology, Volume Three,* 130.

While faith is concern about what is ultimate, it can be misdirected. Ultimate concern can be directed toward what is not truly ultimate but merely "preliminary." Tillich gives as examples one's nation or one's personal success, two things that very commonly draw a person's totally centered commitment. Faith that is ultimately concerned about what is not truly ultimate, that raises the preliminary to the status of ultimacy, is *idolatrous* faith. The elevation of that which is not truly ultimate to the status of ultimacy is the definition of idolatry. Idolatrous faith has a tendency to become *demonic,* a destructive empowerment of the unholy mistaken for true holiness.

Being grasped by an ultimate concern can become a basis for *courage,* which is a part of faith. "Courage as an element of faith is the daring self-affirmation of one's own being in spite of the powers of 'nonbeing' which are the heritage of everything finite."[92] Tillich develops this idea in more detail elsewhere,[93] where he provides a full analysis of the types of nonbeing and how faith can meet them. But faith is a commitment, and every commitment entails risk. The risk that faith takes upon itself is the danger that what it turns to as ultimate may in fact prove not to be so. False gods tend to disappear, possibly leaving one's entire world in tatters. Because this risk is always present, doubt is inevitable. Doubt belongs to faith and is not its opposite.

> All this is sharply expressed in the relation between faith and doubt. If faith is understood as belief that something is true, doubt is incompatible with the act of faith. If faith is understood as being ultimately concerned, doubt is a necessary element in it. It is a consequence of the risk of faith.[94]

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[92] Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith,* 17.
[93] Tillich, *Courage to Be*.
[94] Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith,* 18.

Doubt is not a sign that faith is lacking. “Serious doubt is confirmation of faith,”[95] because it indicates the absolute nature of the individual’s concern.

Tillich’s perspective on faith should make us reconsider the phenomenon of atheism. The protest against religion by some atheists is motivated by a deep moral sense, which in certain individuals is clearly an ultimate concern. Such people may be considered to have a much deeper faith than a religious fundamentalist who judges people by what they believe.

We have already spoken of the importance of symbols to religion. Symbols are especially important in the life of faith because no human language can capture ultimate reality. We have already mentioned how, according to Tillich, no statement can be made about God that is not symbolic except for the assertion that God is being-itself. Beyond that, our only recourse is to symbols.

> That which is the true ultimate transcends the realm of finite reality infinitely. Therefore, no finite reality can express it directly and properly.... The language of faith is the language of symbols.[96]

Therefore one should not say that a given religious expression is “only a symbol,” but rather “not less than a symbol,” since symbolic language possesses a power not given to mere concepts.

Symbolic language applies to anything we raise to the level of ultimacy, because only symbols can express what is ultimate, even if a particular ultimate is false and the symbols are idolatrous.

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[95] Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 22.
[96] Ibid., 44,45.

Now we come to the most fundamental religious symbol of all, which is God itself. “God” is a symbol for what to us is ultimate; our gods (or even God) are in fact our ultimate concerns.

> God is the fundamental symbol for what concerns us ultimately. Again it would be completely wrong to ask: So God is nothing but a symbol? Because the next question has to be: A symbol for what? And then the answer would be: for God! God is a symbol for God.[97]

This statement contains two layers of meaning. The first, superficial one is that the word “God” is a symbol for what has ultimate importance to us. The second, deeper level is that the word “God” is necessarily a symbol for the real God ungraspable in words, so that even when we talk about the true, ultimate God we are still not speaking literally but symbolically. The word “God” is rich in connotations that help us understand the true ultimate but cannot be taken literally (e.g., God is a “Father,” God is a “King,” God is a “good shepherd,” God has eyes with which to see and ears with which to hear). These connotations are not false, because as Tillich says, a symbol (in contrast to a sign or a concept) participates in the reality to which it points. But symbols are still symbols, which is to say not that they are mere words lacking power but precisely the opposite, that they possess power denied to ordinary words.

A key question now arises, which every theology needs to answer: What is the criterion of truth? Of all possible and conceivable symbols, which ones point to ultimate reality and which ones lead us astray? How do we know when the object of something that concerns us ultimately is truly ultimate? Or in other words, which kind of faith is true faith? Religion’s failure to answer this question properly has been the cause of untold human suffering and violence.

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[97] Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith,* 46.

Tillich looks for the answer in "revelation," but this word must be properly understood. The popular understanding of revelation as information supposedly dictated by God to man, and faith as the acceptance of such information no matter how irrational it may seem, is a distortion. No: "Revelation is first of all the experience in which an ultimate concern grasps the human mind and creates a community in which this concern expresses itself in symbols of action, imagination, and thought."[98] But this does not answer the question, and Tillich knows it. Ideally revelation is the manifestation of the ultimate in an ultimate concern. But because we exist in a state of estrangement and corruption, this conviction is not secure. Successive revelations fight to correct preceding ones and assert their claims to ultimacy, but corruption enters into the new revelations just as in the old. The corruption of revelation and faith can be conquered only by "a final revelation in which the distortion of faith and reason is definitely overcome. Christianity claims to be based on this revelation. Its claim is exposed to the continuous pragmatic test of history."[99]

Unfortunately Tillich ends the section with this sentence. Tillich does develop the concept of "final revelation" in Jesus as the Christ in much detail in his *Systematic Theology,* which we have already discussed. But what of the "pragmatic test of history"? Tillich does return to this theme:

> The history of faith as a whole stands under judgment. The weakness of all faith is the ease with which it becomes idolatrous. The human mind, Calvin has said, is a continuously working factory of idols. This is true of all types of faith, and even if Protestant Christianity is considered as the point in which the different types converge, it is open to idolatrous distortions. It must also apply against itself the criterion which it uses against other forms of faith. Every type of faith has the tendency to elevate its concrete symbols to absolute validity. The

[98] Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith,* 78.
[99] Ibid., 79-80.

> criterion of the truth of faith, therefore, is that it implies an element of self-negation.[100]

Tillich finds this self-negating element in the cross of Christ. "Jesus could not have been the Christ without sacrificing himself as Jesus to himself as the Christ."[101] The cross itself embodies what Tillich has called the "Protestant principle," the assertion that God alone is ultimate and no church and no doctrine or finite expression of truth has the right to claim for itself the status of ultimacy.

But is Christian revelation really "self-negating," or historically has it more often been triumphalistic? It is hard to see how Tillich can overcome the limitations imposed by his own analysis, because even if we turn to a "final revelation" to solve the dilemma created by the clash of imperfect revelations, once we begin trying to describe the content of this final revelation the human frailty that corrupts every revelation cannot be avoided. This would seem to follow from Tillich's own Protestant principle:

> The criterion [of the truth of a symbol of faith] contains a Yes—it does not reject any truth of faith in whatever form it may appear in the history of faith—and it contains a No—it does not accept any truth of faith as ultimate except the one that no man possesses it. The fact that this criterion is identical with the Protestant principle and has become a reality in the Cross of the Christ constitutes the superiority of Protestant Christianity.[102]

Ironically, the superiority of Protestant Christianity should then consist in a humble admission that no religion, including itself, can claim to express final revelation. As Tillich himself says, "the symbol of the Cross stands against the self-elevation of a concrete religion to ultimacy, including Christianity."[103] If we take these words seriously,

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[100] Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 97.
[101] Ibid., 97-98.
[102] Ibid., 98.
[103] Iibid., 122-23.

they seem to imply that a "final revelation" is actually a self-contradictory and unattainable goal.

In his concluding discussion Tillich makes two important connections: between faith and courage, and between faith and love.

Faith represents a bridging of separation. For if one were completely united with the object of one's faith one would possess it as a certainty, and it would not be faith. Therefore doubt cannot be avoided in the life of faith. Mysticism fails to recognize the inevitability of this separation, striving for a complete union that is either elusive or illusory. Courage faces it, accepts doubt as part of faith, and persists in faith in spite of doubt. That which gives courage the power to do this is the state of being grasped by what one experiences as ultimate.[104] And that in fact is the essence of faith. Thus courage and faith are inseparable.

Finally, Tillich recognizes an essential bond between faith, love, and action. As just noted, there is no faith without a sense of separation. Love is the drive to unite what has been separated. Thus faith naturally finds expression in love. That this has historically often not been the case is due to a distortion of the meaning of faith, to refer to doctrines rather than ultimate concerns. This distortion has caused Christianity to fall into what Tillich calls "doctrinal legalism."[105] A certain reading of Paul that has become popular ever since Luther and Calvin has greatly contributed to this. It posits "justification by faith" to mean that we are saved only by adherence to certain creeds, and that human action counts for nothing. Tillich rightly points out that such theologies separate faith from love and lead to the deterioration of religion.

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[104] Again, see *The Courage to Be* for a fuller treatment.
[105] Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith,* 113.

Faith implies love, and love expresses itself in action. Without works faith can become a meaningless abstraction. When the Protestant Reformers criticized the Catholic doctrine that works are necessary for salvation they asserted rightly that it is God and not humanity who unites that which is separated. However, the Reformers went too far by discounting the role of action as the expression of faith in love. Echoing James, Tillich states: “Faith implies love; love lives in works: in this sense faith is actual in works.”[106] Tillich’s perspective on faith helps us realize that the old controversy of James versus Paul, do we or do we not need works to establish a right relationship with God, is a manufactured one. Faith, love, and works constitute a triune reality that must not be broken.

[106] Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith,* 115-16.

Judeochristianity

I began investigating faith to solve a contradiction. On the one hand, it did not seem to me that faith as usually presented, as a set of specific beliefs, should alone be transformative. Most of us adhere to the beliefs with which we were raised; yet often we make exclusive claims for those beliefs, which we might just as easily have made had we been raised in a different system. Therefore, it seemed to me, what one happens to believe does not express the deepest levels of one's personhood or connection to God. Yet throughout my years working in hospice I was struck repeatedly by something remarkable: those who had the most "faith" were very often the ones who met their illnesses and even death with the greatest serenity and courage.

I wanted to know what this faith is all about, and what makes it possible. While it is often expressed *in* belief, it must be something beyond belief, since belief alone, as I also observed, is not enough to carry one through to that profound inner peace. Beliefs are the clothes that faith may wear, but underneath must be something far more profound.

As I got to know my patients better, especially those who had the most faith, I noticed that very many of them led lives characterized by that special kind of love that Judeochristianity calls non-self-interested love. The book gives several examples:

There was Joanna, just 30 years old and dying of kidney failure. Joanna used to donate blood frequently, until a diabetes diagnosis forced her to stop. She volunteered in nursing homes. She made sandwiches and distributed them to homeless people in neighborhoods considered unsafe.[107]

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[107] Gourgey, *Judeochristianity,* 61-62.

There was Muriel, 83, nauseous and vomiting from cancer but unshaken, saying she had no fear. “What’s a little vomiting?” she asked, as if it were nothing. As a child Muriel fed a frail neighbor who could not feed herself. As an active member of her church she cooked Thanksgiving turkeys for homeless people and delivered them herself, to some of the city’s worst neighborhoods. She often took in people from her native Trinidad who came to this country with no place to stay.[108]

There was Lillian, who had been a nurse when healthy and who never lost her dedication to service, even while terminally ill. I saw her in the hospice unit, not wearing a nurse’s uniform but a bathrobe, looking in on another patient, a tiny and frail woman of 104 years, and asking her if her feet were cold and if she needed an extra blanket. Lillian met her own final moments expressing deep joy and gratitude. Just before she died she said she could see an angel.[109]

And finally there was Julie, my former spiritual director. She was poor, lived in a trailer, discriminated against for being Native American. She was never paid what she was worth, but donated many hours of free chaplaincy to the neighborhood hospital. Even when sick with cancer she was always optimistic and in good spirits. She knew that her life was divinely directed, and she gave me that sense about my own life as well.[110]

All of these women died in a state of profound peace. And while they did not all share the same belief system, I would say they all had faith. They were all connected to something higher than themselves, and that something had everything to do with love.

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[108] Gourgey, *Judeochristianity,* 339-40.
[109] Ibid., 132-33.
[110] Ibid., 248-49.

The groundwork we have already laid, establishing the reality of both time and eternity, helps us understand this. We are not exclusively creatures of physical existence. We belong to God and to eternity as well. And the more our nature conforms to the eternal image in which we were created, the more conscious our connection to eternity and the stronger our faith. “To the extent that we commit ourselves and conform to non-self-interested love, the highest good that we can know, then God’s image becomes visible in us. And the more we are *like* God, the more we will *see* God.”[111]

In most general terms we can think of faith as a way of understanding the world that brings order out of chaos. Seen this way, the need for faith is universal. We need to make sense out of things; we need to know what makes our lives and our sufferings worthwhile. This is what Tillich would call an “ultimate concern,” something with the power to justify the tremendous effort life requires. This could be many different things for different people: one’s job, one’s family, one’s group of origin, one’s politics, and very often, one’s religion.

Religion most often comes in the form of teachings one receives as part of one’s upbringing. Religious faith in this sense may be called *received faith.* Received faith can be very powerful, but it also has a dark side.

> There are many kinds of faith. There is religious faith: a sense of the world’s coherence based on received religious teachings. This is the most obvious kind of faith. It has great advantages and great disadvantages. Its advantage is that it really can inspire confidence and assurance in the face of adversity. Its disadvantage is that, since it has been received rather than discovered, questioning or doubting it can elicit deep fear. It therefore has a tendency to become rigid and intolerant. Most world religions claim exclusivity and discourage questioning, and countless wars have been fought in the name of one exclusive religion asserting its dominance over others.[112]

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[111] Gourgey, “Real Presence of God.”
[112] Gourgey, *Judeochristianity,* 317.

The faith those women exemplified was not received faith. It was a sense of the presence of God that grew from devotion to non-self-interested love. This kind of faith has no dark side. It can only seem to be dark if contaminated by the ego, in which case it is no longer based on non-self-interested love. Faith that is based on such love is genuine, and not threatened by the insecurities that can render received faith demonic.

We are led to non-self-interested love by our sense of goodness, which is our God-given capacity to discern that which conforms to God's nature. "He has told you, O mortal, what is good" (Micah 6:8): our sense of goodness has been implanted within us by none other than God. Nevertheless, we are still human and finite, and our sense of goodness is not absolute. On this level of existence different goods are relative; they may compete with each other, and choosing between them is often not an obvious task. Deciding on the best allocation of limited resources, solving moral dilemmas, detecting the greatest need, all pose difficulties that at times may seem insurmountable.

> Expressions of goodness are intrinsically valuable, but they are not absolute. Truth is not good if telling the truth exposes an innocent person to danger. Justice when not tempered with mercy is not always good. Compassion is not good if applied in a way that encourages an attitude that anything goes, that having hurt others is inconsequential, and that forgiveness erases all responsibility. Beauty too is not absolute: art, music, and literature, even when truly beautiful, can still be used contrary to love or even to attack others (an example would be some early passion plays, or much nationalistic music expressing the superiority of one race or nation).[113]

There is, however, one unconditioned, non-relative good, which cannot conflict with other goods, and that is non-self-interested love. If any other good takes precedence over love, it can only be because that love has become self-interested. And most love is self-interested, so not the kind of love that leads to durable faith. The faith

[113] Gourgey, *Judeochristianity,* 324-25.

that has no dark side, as mentioned just now, can only be based on a love that has no conditions, which is non-self-interested love.

How does non-self-interested love lead to faith? It does so by becoming a presence within us. That presence, which we know to be greater than ourselves precisely because it is beyond the self, is God's presence in a form we can experience. Non-self-interested love gives us the direct awareness of God. This leads us to Judeochristianity's definition of genuine faith, which is *the awareness of the power of eternity.* The kind of love that reflects God's nature gives us an awareness of this higher dimension of reality, which we have called the eternal. When we become aware of the reality of the eternal we are in the state of faith, and that produces healing of the wounds within our souls.

We now return to the key question we asked of Tillich (above, p. 48): What is the criterion of truth? How do we know when what we take to be ultimate is truly ultimate? Which kind of faith is true faith? Tillich did not really offer a clear answer, which is a gap in his theology since his concept of faith is based on the idea of "ultimate" concern. We can offer a more specific, if not perfect, answer here. Since God is Absolute Goodness the criterion of truth is goodness, and specifically the highest and only unconditioned good, which is non-self-interested love. Non-self-interested love is the measure by which all other goods are evaluated and implemented. It prescribes our action in the temporal world and it brings us the awareness of eternal reality.

The reason this answer is not perfect is that human beings are not perfect. We have an amazing capacity for self-deception. Thus many atrocities have been committed in the name of "Christian" love. Application of this criterion of truth requires

uncompromising self-honesty. If our love leads to exclusivity, rejection or even condemnation of others, or even violence, then clearly it is not non-self-interested love and it has nothing to do with God. It should not seem necessary to state this, yet religious history proves otherwise.

Nevertheless, as we grow spiritually we gain an increasing if yet flawed understanding of non-self-interested love and what it means to put it into practice. Finding the faith that results from this love can be the journey of a lifetime, but it is possible whether or not one begins from the position of received faith, or whether one calls oneself religious, agnostic, or atheist. Genuine faith need not even negate received faith but can transform and enrich it, as many exemplify who carry forth their received faith in a spirit of genuine love. What one believes or does not believe, doubts or does not doubt, is not the criterion of faith and is no basis for judgment. It is God who searches the heart (Jeremiah 17:10); the heart of another is a sacred space that no outsider can claim to know. Had that been understood, how different the history of religion would have turned out.

Chapter 5

Destiny/Providence

Tillich

To what extent does God actually guide us, and to what extent are we left simply to fend for ourselves? Religion has always tried to answer this question, in the process bumping up against the tough obstacle of human suffering (to be tackled in the next chapter). In nonreligious circles the question seems to have been settled: with naturalism the predominant secular philosophy, the consensus seems to be that we are at the mercy of natural forces and random occurrences. Yet Jesus told us "Do not worry" (Matthew 6:26). How does this all come together?

One may put the question like this: Do we have a God-given destiny towards which we are guided, if we resolve to follow God's will? Tillich does use the term "destiny," but in a rather specialized sense. For Tillich, destiny refers to the conditions given to us in this life, which both limit and expand our potentialities. Destiny belongs with freedom, and together they constitute one of the polarities making up the structure of being.

> Destiny is not a strange power which determines what shall happen to me. It is myself as given, formed by nature, history, and myself. My destiny is the basis of my freedom; my freedom participates in shaping my destiny.[114]

Tillich rejects traditional notions of divine providence that picture God as an external force interfering with the conditions of existence to produce a certain outcome. Instead, Tillich sees providence as God's directing everything toward fulfillment.

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[114] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One,* 185.

> Providence is a permanent activity of God. He never is a spectator; he always directs everything toward its fulfillment. Yet God's directing creativity always creates through the freedom of man and through the spontaneity and structural wholeness of all creatures.... [Providence] is the quality of inner directedness present in every situation. The man who believes in providence does not believe that a special divine activity will alter the conditions of finitude and estrangement. He believes, and asserts with the courage of faith, that no situation whatsoever can frustrate the fulfillment of his ultimate destiny, that nothing can separate him from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus (Romans, chap. 8).[115]

Therefore prayers of supplication and intercession should not ask God to change or cancel an external condition, but rather "to direct the given situation toward fulfillment."[116] A key passage follows immediately:

> As an element in the situation a prayer is a condition of God's directing creativity, but the form of this creativity may be the complete rejection of the manifest content of the prayer. Nevertheless, the prayer may have been heard according to its hidden content, which is the surrender of a fragment of existence to God. This hidden content is always decisive. It is the element in the situation which is used by God's directing creativity. Every serious prayer contains power, not because of the intensity of desire expressed in it, but because of the faith the person has in God's directing activity—a faith which transforms the existential situation.

In other words, a prayer can be answered even when its specific request is denied! And the answer is more than just a "No." It is faith that God will, in God's own way, direct the present situation toward fulfillment—which may take a form we cannot anticipate. This is what it means to pray that "Not my will but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). It is the "Yes" hiding underneath the "No" of an unfulfilled petitionary prayer, if we can surrender the situation in faith that a higher wisdom is present to take it over and use it in ways we could never have foreseen.

The idea that God guides us by transforming situations in unforeseen ways is encapsulated in Tillich's concept of "Spiritual Presence." We noted earlier Tillich's idea

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[115] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One,* 266,267.
[116] Ibid., 267.

that “we live in two orders.” These two orders, essence and existence, inseparably interpenetrate one another like the wheat and the weeds of Jesus’s parable. And so our lives as we experience them are a mixture of union and estrangement, fulfillment and fallenness. This makes life what Tillich calls “ambiguous.” “Life always includes essential and existential elements; this is the root of its ambiguity.”[117] Most of the time we are trapped by life’s ambiguities. But there are moments when eternity breaks into our existence and we know those ambiguities are ultimately transcended. Then we are in a state of true faith. “Faith is the state of being grasped by the Spiritual Presence and opened to the transcendent unity of unambiguous life.”[118] At this point Tillich’s concept of faith and that of Judeochristianity as faith being “the awareness of the power of eternity” are very similar, the difference being that in Judeochristianity we are led to this awareness through following the signs our sense of goodness gives us.

The Spiritual Presence not only brings us to true faith, it brings us genuine love *(agape)* as well. *“Agape* is unambiguous love and therefore impossible for the human spirit by itself.”[119] But the Spiritual Presence creates this love and draws the human being into it.

Here we encounter a key difference between Tillich’s theology and Judeochristianity, for Tillich states:

> We have already indicated that faith logically precedes love, because faith is, so to speak, the human reaction to the Spiritual Presence’s breaking into the human spirit; it is the ecstatic acceptance of the divine Spirit’s breaking-up of the finite mind’s tendency to rest in its own self-sufficiency.[120]

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[117] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume Three,* 107.
[118] Ibid., 131.
[119] Ibid.*,* 135.
[120] Ibid.

In Judeochristianity faith is not the prerequisite for love; it is the other way around. We discover genuine faith through valuing and seeking goodness, and especially non-self-interested love—for then love becomes a presence within us that brings us to the presence of God. Tillich is absolutely correct that the complete realization of this love is “impossible for the human spirit,” but even before we have true faith, which is a conscious connection to eternal life, we can approximate this love and begin conforming ourselves to it simply by cherishing it. And that gives us an entrance to the eternal. Thus while we cannot create faith through our own efforts alone, there are steps we can take to approach it. Tillich’s more traditional approach to faith leaves us helpless before the whim of God as to who is or is not granted the blessing of this faith.

We may conclude this part of the discussion with a consideration of Tillich’s understanding of the ultimate destiny of the individual. Once we approach the boundary conditions of life and the thin line separating life and death, there is very little we are able to say. But there is something. By its very nature the temporal order of being is finite; it comes to an end. History therefore has an “end” in both senses of the word (termination and purpose); its end is eternal life. Through this end essence conquers existence.

We are now entering the realm of eschatology, or “last things.” At this point our sense of time becomes shaky, because once we consider eternal life we are no longer dealing with events in time. “The eternal is not a future state of things. It is always present, not only in man (who is aware of it), but also in everything that has being within

the whole of being."[121] Popular notions of eternity as a state of future bliss after death risk discarding the eternal moments that belong inextricably to temporal life. There is never a moment in which eternal life is not present; there are only times when we are not conscious of it. The temporal order is finite; it comes to an end. Eternal life is a process taking into itself the nonbeing that the temporal order introduces, working with it to transform our character, and ultimately conquering it. "In the transition from the temporal to the eternal the negative is negated."[122]

This is Tillich's fundamental eschatological statement. It is the basic principle regarding our individual destiny: "Being, elevated into eternity, involves a return to what a thing essentially is; this is what Schelling has called 'essentialization.'"[123] Essentialization is the determining eschatological principle. It encompasses a being's return to its essence from the state of existential estrangement, and in the case of the human being, a purification of the darkness that obscured the image of God. But essentialization means even more: the "positive" or "new" that we actualize in time and space also contributes to our essentialization. Our temporal existence and the decisions we make within it are therefore of critical importance.

> Participation in the eternal life depends on a creative synthesis of a being's essential nature with what it has made of it in its temporal existence. In so far as the negative has maintained possession of it, it is exposed in its negativity and excluded from eternal memory. Whereas, in so far as the essential has conquered existential distortion its standing is higher in eternal life.[124]

Eternal life in its fulfillment is called the Kingdom of God. In the Kingdom of God the ambiguities of temporal existence are finally overcome. The Kingdom of God is "the

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[121] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume Three,* 400.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Ibid., 401.

unambiguous and non-fragmentary life of love."[125] "Eternal Life is still life [and not the 'dead identity' to which some mystical religions lead], and the universal centeredness does not dissolve the individual centers."[126] Moreover, in eternal life "every finite being drives beyond itself toward fulfillment of its destiny,"[127] implying a more teleological understanding of "destiny" than was apparent in Tillich's earlier discussions. In eternal life morality is fulfilled and therefore no longer necessary.

> Eternal life is the end of morality. For there is no ought-to-be in it which, at the same time, is not. There is no law where there is essentialization, because what the law demands is nothing but the essence, creatively enriched in existence. We assert the same when we call Eternal Life the life of universal and perfect love. For love does what law demands before it is demanded. To use another terminology, we can say that in Eternal Life the center of the individual person rests in the all-uniting divine center and through it is in communion with all other personal centers. Therefore the demand to acknowledge them as persons and to reunite with them as estranged parts of the universal unity is not needed. Eternal Life is the end of morality because what morality demanded is fulfilled in it.[128]

Understanding essentialization leads to the conclusion that there is no sharp dichotomy between "heaven" and "hell." No one fulfills all of one's potentialities, but neither is anyone left with nothing positive however small. The process is unique to each individual, and there are many gradations. There is a divine judgment, consisting of the exposure and eventual discarding of one's negativities, and that exposure may become an occasion for despair. But there is no absolute or irrevocable condemnation, for no one is fully a saint or fully a sinner, and no one is beyond the reach of divine forgiveness. Essentialization "emphasizes the despair of having wasted one's potentialities yet also assures the elevation of the positive within existence (even in the

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[125] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume Three*, 402.
[126] Ibid., 401.
[127] Ibid., 402.
[128] Ibid.

most unfulfilled life) into eternity."[129] Not even the worst sinner is beyond God's reach, for if saints and sinners were destined for two separate and irreconcilable worlds, then even God would be eternally split.

Even while describing all this, Tillich is keenly aware of the limitations of what we can know or say about the human being's ultimate destiny. The question that always arises in these discussions, whether the self-conscious self persists in Eternal Life (sometimes Tillich capitalizes it; sometimes he does not), can be answered by only two statements, both of them negative:

1. "The self-conscious self cannot be excluded from eternal life."[130]

2. "The self-conscious self in Eternal Life is not what it is in temporal life."[131]

This is completely logical. Since eternal life is truly life and not a static and dead identity, and since the Kingdom of God is the complete and unambiguous actualization of love, there must exist centers of consciousness who can participate in that love, for love is meaningless without participation. At the same time, eternal life is not just the continuation of temporal existence without a body; it is not "the endless continuation of a particular stream of consciousness in memory and anticipation,"[132] even though that may be how we usually think of it. The temporal existence of separate autonomous wills is inconceivable without conflict and ambiguity, but in the Kingdom of God all ambiguities are overcome. Beyond these two negative statements about the destiny of the individual in eternal life we can say nothing; we can only write poetry.

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[129] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume Three*, 407.
[130] Ibid., 413.
[131] Ibid., 414.
[132] Ibid.

We still have a problem. What if someone dies unreconciled to God, to love, and to eternity? What if the metaphorical scales balance in the direction of evil and a rejection of eternal values? Is not "eternal death" possible; that is, death away from eternity? But that would contradict the nature of all things coming from eternity, belonging to it, and returning to it. Justice may require the existence of hell, but then eternity itself would be fragmented. Both sides of this paradox have informed church teaching throughout the ages since Augustine, Thomas, and Calvin on one side and Origen and Unitarian Universalism on the other. It is a core problem that every religion tries to solve: if we die unperfected (and who really does not?) then how can we be ready for pure Eternal Life? Eastern religions attempt to solve this with reincarnation: what we don't learn in one life we have a chance to learn in the next. However, this solution is unsatisfactory. There is no way for the individual to remember all the different identities, so it is hard to imagine how one can possibly learn from them. And since one has no memory of previous existences ("past life regression" claims notwithstanding), it is as if each successive existence happens to a different person. Tillich makes this point elsewhere:

> May we go outside the boundaries of Christian tradition to listen to those who would tell us that this life does not determine our eternal destiny? There will be other lives, they would say, predicated, like our present life, on previous ones and what we wasted or achieved in them. This is a serious doctrine and not completely strange to Christianity. But since we don't know and never shall know what each of us was in a previous existence, or will be in a future one it is not really *our* destiny developing from life to life, but in each life, the destiny of someone *else.*[133]

[133] Tillich, *Eternal Now,* 45.

Finally, since no human being reaches perfection in this life, it would take an infinity of incarnations to complete the learning process, which would require the extension of temporal existence beyond temporality.

The Catholic solution to the problem is the doctrine of purgatory, a temporary state of punishment and suffering meant to purify the soul for heaven. But this too has problems: "it is a theological mistake to derive transformation from pain alone instead of from grace which gives blessedness without pain."[134]

Protestantism rejected the Catholic doctrine of purgatory and tried to resolve the paradox by taking the doctrine of resurrection literally and positing an intermediate state of slumber until the final awakening. The problems with this solution are obvious. How does one learn anything if one is asleep? Also, as Tillich points out, this notion extends measurable time to life beyond death. One could go even further and point out that the literal bodily resurrection preached by N.T. Wright and many other theologians (some Jewish as well as Christian) really does make eternity a continuation of temporal existence. The doctrine of a literal, universal resurrection is an anachronistic carry-over of first-century eschatology.

So there appears to be truth on both sides: we can stray from God for periods as long as our choosing, but ultimately we belong to God. How do we resolve this paradox? All these things we have discussed, including heaven, hell, karma, and even reincarnation, cannot be taken literally but have value as symbols pointing toward a higher truth. How one lives one's life is critical and affects the degree of one's essentialization. There is cause for both the despair of falling short of expectations and

[134] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume Three,* 417.

the joy of reconciliation. Again, the only solution available to us now would seem to take the form of negative statements: we are neither permanently separated from God, nor included in eternity in our present condition. This would have to leave room for some form of development after temporal existence, but more about this we cannot say.

And so everything that happens to us, the good, the bad, the evil and the suffering, can be understood as falling under the activity of the divine life.

> In this view the world process means something for God. He is not a separated self-sufficient entity who, driven by a whim, creates what he wants and saves whom he wants. Rather, the eternal act of creation is driven by a love which finds fulfillment only through the other one who has the freedom to reject and to accept love. God, so to speak, drives toward the actualization and essentialization of everything that has being. For the eternal dimension of what happens in the universe is the Divine Life itself. It is the content of the divine blessedness.[135]

We can grasp the nature of eternity, including the eternal destiny of the individual soul, only symbolically. Nevertheless, we know enough to realize the seriousness of our temporal existence and the significance of every decision we make. For all of this, our life and our death and our sufferings and our joys, are part of the Divine Life, which consists of the eternal ground separating and returning to itself to actualize the reality of love.

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[135] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume Three,* 422.

Judeochristianity

The concluding section of Tillich's *Systematic Theology,* which we have just discussed, is the most sublime theological writing that I know. One can hardly add anything to it. Nevertheless, there are some differences with Judeochristianity's treatment of destiny, to which we now turn.

A consideration of destiny may begin with the question, Does God affect our daily lives or not? The Bible is very clear about this: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1). Over and over again the Bible describes God's involvement in human life. Yet today we seem to have abandoned this idea. Popular theologians, typified by Harold Kushner,[136] say that God really doesn't do anything to affect our lives directly but at least feels our pain as a sympathetic but helpless spectator. Such a God may be more palatable to today's rationalistic culture, but such a God is not biblical.

Destiny is often confused with fate, but the two are very different. One is biblical, the other is not.

> "Destiny" is not the same as "fate." "Fate," from the Latin *fatum,* "utterance" or "decree," generally means an event which one cannot escape. This idea comes from the Greeks and is foreign to the Bible. "Destiny," however, is a biblical concept. The word comes from the Latin *stare,* "to stand"; it is the place where we are situated in life. It is not a predetermined future, but the purpose for which we were created, the contribution we make to life as a whole. It is the life to which we are called: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you" (Jeremiah 1:5); "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel" (Luke 2:34).[137]

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[136] Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Schocken, 1981).
[137] Charles Gourgey, "Disability and Destiny," *Journal of Religion in Disability and Rehabilitation* 2, no. 1 (November 1995):77 (also available at http://www.judeochristianity.org/disabled/destiny.htm).

Jesus knew he had a destiny, as evidenced by the so-called "passion predictions": "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (Luke 9:22). We each have a destiny as well. Note, this is not a *pre*-destiny, but rather a calling and a set of talents to attain it, which we may or may not fulfill. Jesus calls this the "light" within each of us that we must allow to shine (Matthew 5:14-16). We can detect our destiny by noting both our skills and our interests. We each have different interests, which is important because a functioning society needs all roles and gifts, and when we cultivate those interests we often discover things we are good at. The discovery may take years, but God is not in a hurry. Still, God wants us to use whatever gifts we are given, be they large or even very small, because the world needs them all. Hence the brilliance of the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30), which tells us everything we need to know about destiny: even the most humble among us have a destiny, and reaching that destiny is not a given. It is possible for us to miss our destiny. The result is a self-alienation that Jesus describes as "outer darkness."

The principle of destiny is therefore this: "*Even in this world of chaos in which we live, God has given each of us a purpose, a reason for being here, and responds to us when we try to use what we have been given.*"[138] The limited-God theology popular today cannot sustain this idea. God actually is an active shaping force in our lives. Principle #11 of Judeochristianity expresses this:

> We can even speak of a specific reason for the creation of each one of us. This individualized reason is called our destiny. It is the unique way in which we each are called to express goodness in our own lives. It may involve the talents we were given, the jobs we must perform, or entirely different things, including

[138] Gourgey, "Disability and Destiny," 79.

> our network of relationships and the ways we express love through them. We may think of the spiritual journey that orders our lives as the search to find and fulfill our destiny. We cannot know it in advance. We discover it by devoting ourselves to God's will, which is the expression of goodness. To practice this we search for and follow the cues that point us toward ways of expressing goodness that best fit our individual constitution and life circumstances.[139]

The funny thing about our destiny is that we're usually not aware of it as it's unfolding. Often it is only through hindsight that we can detect a pattern to our life's events. The great biblical example of this is the story of Joseph. So many terrible things happened to him, so many apparent wrong turns, but eventually a greater good emerged. As Joseph told his brothers, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good" (Genesis 50:20). Or as Paul said, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God" (Romans 8:28); that is, for those who cherish goodness. There is no way to prove this; we can only test it out in our own lives, seeing how a true commitment to non-self-interested love leads to positive changes and can even transform one's life, as in the examples of the women mentioned in the previous chapter. This transformation may not come easily, and there may even be much suffering along the way, but if one is on this path one has a sense of inevitability, that God uses everything in one's life for fulfillment, and that one attains a realization of goodness due to a power greater than one's own. We noted this earlier in the chapter on God: God responds to that within us which reflects God's nature, most especially non-self-interested love, and this divine response gives us our destiny.

And that is how destiny saves us from fate. When we are "in Covenant," committing ourselves fully to goodness and to non-self-interested love, we honor God's

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[139] Gourgey, *Judeochristianity,* xxviii-xxix.

image and nature in us, creating an anchor by which God pulls us through our destiny and saves us from becoming victims of random occurrences.

> When we are "in Covenant" there is still suffering, but there are no random accidents, at least not of any significance. When we are "in Covenant," God uses everything in our lives to bring us to our destiny. Every unfortunate incident we experience either contributes to our destiny or is not ultimately significant. Earlier we spoke of "fate." The man and woman "of dust" are subjects of fate. Good things and bad things appear to happen without making any sense to them. Since so much seems governed by chance, fear is difficult to escape and can become very strong. But when we are "in Covenant," *fate* is replaced by *destiny.*
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> Our destiny is the fulfillment of our individuality during our earthly life. It is like the flowering of a planted seed. The seed is the person; the flower is the destiny. In biblical terms, our destiny encompasses the resources given to each one of us as their steward; for each it is different and unique. Destiny is not a deterministic "plan." It is not something that happens no matter what. It is rather the realization of the specific goodness given to each of us as a potentiality.[140]

In conclusion, by honoring God's image in which we were created, which specifically means making a sincere and radical commitment to non-self-interested love, *we can live our lives governed by eternity rather than chance.* And the good news is we don't have to achieve a perfect realization of this love.

> Now do not be discouraged if you cannot realize this love perfectly. Nobody can. And we are not required to. All we are asked is to seek it with all our heart: "Seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Luke 12: 1).[141]

And now, as we did with Tillich, we turn to the ultimate destiny of the individual. Tillich's writing on this subject cannot be matched. The presentation in Judeochristianity is more limited. It is based on my experiences in hospice, being with people who were close to death. Sharing time and space with people who were actively dying, even (and especially) when they could no longer respond, I often sensed a very profound peace, a deeper peace than anything I have ever known anywhere else. One indication, I

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[140] Gourgey, "Real Presence of God."
[141] Gourgey, *Judeochristianity,* 17.

believe, that this deep peace had to do with these people more than with me, is that since leaving hospice I have never felt it again. It was truly something from beyond this world.

With many of these hospice patients, it felt as though once the body becomes too weak to sustain the controlling intellect, the soul of the individual has a chance to come closer to the surface. Many of these people may have been overtly fearful or angry, but once they reached that final stage and had to start letting go, the deep peace that I believe awaits us all had a chance to take over. It was definitely not simply the absence of anxiety or agitation due to a weak body. It was an active presence of healing peace, which healed me too when I was blessed to be close to it. I have never known such peace anywhere but in hospice sharing the last moments with people who were dying.

I believe this is a sign, or a clue, to the nature of the eternal. Every anxiety we experience is, in essence, a response to the perceived threat of what Tillich would call "nonbeing." That is, a threat to any aspect of our existence. The ultimate threat to our existence is death. The fear of death is thus built into our structure as human beings. Faith as *the awareness of the power of the eternal* is the one thing strong enough to counter this fear.

> Eternity is not some event in time that arrives at a certain moment, after we die. It is a whole other dimension of existence, which is always available to us and to which we always belong. To know this dimension is to know what we need to know to resolve the anxiety of death.
>
> But how can we know it? We never know it with certainty. We cannot know it through our powers of observation. We cannot know it through our powers of reasoning. We know it through our sense of goodness.
>
> To know goodness in any form gives us awareness of a source of meaning and value in which we participate. We can sense this most strongly in the greatest good of all, non-self-interested love.[142]

[142] Gourgey, *Judeochristianity,* 129.

As we have seen, this love becomes a presence both within us and beyond us, giving us the awareness of a different dimension of existence that we call eternal. With this awareness comes a tiny inkling of what might lie beyond physical existence.

> Loving beyond self-interest is the best way to know of a reality beyond the impermanence and decay of the physical world. We can follow the soul's awareness of this love to the awareness of eternity itself. We can practice this. We can become conscious of this love, we can let it place its mark upon the soul, and eternity will be revealed. Then we will know eternity as a very present aspect of our lives, grasping and guiding us in this life and in whatever is "after"—for to eternity it is all the same, it is all of one piece, it is all one life.[143]

Only in the new dimension of the eternal can we find the answer. Traditional answers—the Western concept of "heaven" and the Eastern idea of reincarnation—fail because they find the solution of existential ambiguity in an extension of human time. Whatever heaven is, and it may indeed be real, it cannot simply be an extension of present life without a body, as many seem to hope. It must be something we cannot humanly imagine, yet still receive intimations that it is ultimately good. So while traditional concepts like "heaven," "hell," and "reincarnation" cannot be taken literally, they do have symbolic significance.

> Nobody knows what the afterlife is really like. Every description of it is a symbol. "Heaven" is a symbol of the goodness we perceive undiluted by the impurities of human intention. "Hell" is a symbol of the justice and balance needed to complete the goodness that is only partially realized on earth. "Reincarnation" is a symbol of the need for learning to continue after the conclusion of earthly life. All of these should be taken seriously; none should be taken literally.[144]

And here there is agreement that what we can actually say about the life to come is very limited, since beyond a certain point we cannot help projecting onto the life to come the features of our present existence, which is all we know. Yet we can say

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[143] Gourgey, *Judeochristianity,* 130.
[144] Ibid., 130-31.

something. Faith—the awareness of the presence and the power of the eternal—gives us confidence that whatever in this life participates in the eternal still endures. And this includes, on some level we may hardly be able to grasp, our relations with others.

> What, then, of reunion with our loved ones? Do we have any hope of that? We do not know in what form we or our loved ones may survive this life on earth, and those who claim otherwise speak without knowledge. However, our sense of goodness tells us that genuine love shared is eternal, it is limitless, it does not get lost. It will survive, in ways we cannot imagine. “Love is strong as death” (Song of Songs 8:6). Similarly, there is no hell as an actual place of burning or torture for the unrepentant - such tortures have no meaning when the physical body no longer exists. But justice, which is a part of goodness, demands an accounting, and it will be easier for us to judge ourselves and return to goodness through our own free choice than to wait for the judgment that goodness one day will require.[145]

In contemplating the afterlife we can be guided by two biblical principles:

> *The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the revealed things belong to us and to our children forever.* (Deuteronomy 29:29)

And

> *Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.* (Matthew 6:19-21)

Searching for specifics will not lead us anywhere—we are meant to cherish goodness for its own sake, not for any eternal reward, so concerning the latter there will always be uncertainty. Nevertheless faith can give us what our human investigative powers cannot, which is a sense that what truly participates in eternity, the genuine love shared with others, is indestructible and has a place where it cannot be touched.

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[145] Gourgey, *Judeochristianity,* 131.

I will conclude with a personal experience which, while it cannot prove anything, still gives me some confidence and hope about what might be waiting for us after we complete our earthly destiny.

It was in hospice. I found one of our patients, Fern, reading a book. She put it down while I played some soft flute music for her. She enjoyed it and asked me to come back the following week.

When I did come back I found Fern in a very different state. She was comatose now, but moaning, almost screaming in fear. Her arms flailed in agitated and uncontrollable movements. The nurses told me she had been that way all morning, and that nothing could calm her down.

I played some more of my flute music for her, a low, plaintive folk tune, over and over again. I would play for several moments, then stop to hold her hand or stroke her face, then resume my playing. She became completely quiet. A few moments later she was gone. I sat with her for a while afterwards, then went home.

After a short while I found myself seized by a deep sense of peace and happiness, something I perceived from beyond myself and that I felt was grasping and holding me. I have never felt anything like that either before or since. It really did seem like Fern's presence guiding me, but it was much more than that. It was as if another dimension of existence had opened.

> This feeling of deep peace remained with me for three whole days. During those three days, I took a vacation from time. In everything I did, I felt a loving presence beside me. It was with me, watching over me, assuring me. I could almost hear a voice telling me not to fear, that everything will be all right, that in the end not one of us will be forgotten. I cannot remember experiencing greater joy and reassurance.[146]

[146] Gourgey. *Judeochristianity,* 355.

There is nothing I would love more than to return to that place. But we are not meant to stay there, not yet. There is too much work to do. The angels barred the way to Eden so that Adam and Eve could not return. They first had to realize their human destiny, and to hand it down to us as well. But beyond this sphere, when time is exhausted, there is a promise of joy for which it is never irrational to hope.

Chapter 6

Theodicy

Tillich

Theodicy is one of the most longstanding and deeply motivating questions with which theologies have grappled. Every comprehensive theology must address it at some point, because it touches the blood and bone of our human experience. As usually stated, the question of *theodicy* ("divine justice"), a term coined by the German philosopher Leibniz, goes like this: If God is both good and all-powerful, how can God permit the existence of evil? Another way of putting it is: How can we possibly have faith when confronted by all of life's deep sufferings, illness, death, the loss of loved ones, unspeakable pain, and it seems there is no escape? Confronting these questions is no mere intellectual exercise. Whether or not we are believers, we all need the inner resources to enable us to function when life strikes us hard, and it is to this basic human need that theodicy speaks.

Tillich's treatment of theodicy is rather traditional and, it must be said, somewhat vague. He definitely asks the right question:

> Faith in God's directing creativity always is challenged by man's experience of a world in which the conditions of the human situation seem to exclude many human beings from even an anticipatory and fragmentary fulfillment. Early death, destructive social conditions, feeble-mindedness and insanity, the undiminished horrors of historical existence—all these seem to verify belief in fate rather than faith in providence. How can an almighty God be justified *(theos-dike)* in view of realities in which no meaning whatsoever can be discovered?[147]

Tillich's immediate response seems frustratingly facile:

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[147] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One,* 269.

> Theodicy is not a question of physical evil, pain, death, etc., nor is it a question of moral evil, sin, self-destruction, etc. Physical evil is the natural implication of creaturely finitude. Moral evil is the tragic implication of creaturely freedom. Creation is the creation of finite freedom; it is the creation of life with its greatness and its danger.[148]

Well, theodicy is precisely the question of those things. Tillich disposes of the issue by saying, in effect, "Well, what do you expect from a creation that by its nature is limited?" This begs the important questions: Why these specific limitations? Why must they come with so much pain? And how can we have confidence in the face of such limitations that God is really good? No wonder the Gnostics held that the world was not created by a truly good God but by an incompetent "demiurge" experimenting and bungling badly. Can we possibly do better than that?

Tillich's response identifies the two traditional categories of evil: *natural evil,* which includes serious illness and natural disasters, and *moral evil,* which includes the awful things people do to each other. Tillich's response does not address the *necessity* of physical or natural evil: is it not conceivable that the world could be otherwise, that a good God could have designed a world in which natural calamities are not so extreme? The traditional justification of moral evil, that human freedom makes it inevitable, has no relevance to the existence of natural evil. Tillich's treatment of natural evil is therefore circular: it exists because that's how the world was created.

Tillich's treatment of moral evil is not new; it is in fact the response one almost always hears when theologians discuss the issue: the existence of moral evil in all its forms is justified or at least necessary because any limitation on moral evil would curtail human freedom. (Actually "justified" is not too strong a term, since the usual

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[148] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One,* 269.

explanations maintain that God must allow unlimited moral evil for the sake of unlimited freedom.) This elevates human freedom to the status of an absolute good, to which all others must be subordinate. Tillich's theology offers no justification for such a move. Repeatedly Tillich characterizes human freedom as "finite freedom"; it is therefore difficult to comprehend why this freedom, if indeed finite, must carry no restrictions whatsoever.

Upon reflection we cannot consider human freedom an absolute good. As a good, human freedom conflicts with other goods; therefore restricting it is sometimes necessary. We restrict freedom through the laws we pass that are necessary for society to function. We place limitations on our children when we raise them; we do not allow them to maim and hurt each other as their whims may direct. Clearly there is some good that we consider superior to freedom. Why then do we assume God must make human freedom an absolute good? Nevertheless, Tillich is satisfied with this response: "The creation of finite freedom is the risk which the divine creativity accepts. This is the first step in arriving at an answer to the question of theodicy."[149]

Unlike some popular theologians, Tillich realizes that this first step is not a final step: "However, this does not answer the question why it seems that some beings are excluded from any kind of fulfillment, even from free resistance against their fulfillment."[150] Tillich then makes in interesting observation. We cannot ask the question of theodicy except for ourselves. We can inquire about the meaning of our own suffering, but we cannot discern the meaning of another's. Our destinies are individual

[149] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One,* 269.
[150] Ibid.

and unique, and we cannot know what another person's suffering means for his or her relationship with God.

Nevertheless, we are driven by the suffering of others to keep asking the question of theodicy; just knowing our own inseparability from the love of God is not enough. The answer lies in the realization that our individual destinies are connected. "The destiny of the individual cannot be separated from the destiny of the whole in which it participates."[151] As Tillich states elsewhere, perhaps more persuasively:

> There is an ultimate unity of all beings, rooted in the divine life from which they emerge and to which they return. All beings, non-human as well as human, participate in it. And therefore they all participate in each other.[152]

We each participate in a common destiny, belonging to "the creative unity of individualization and participation in the depth of the divine life."[153] This is where the question of theodicy finds its solution. We cannot separate people into fulfilled and unfulfilled, saved and damned, for such divisions contradict "the ultimate unity of individualization and participation in the creative ground of the divine life."[154]

We can go one step further. Even nonbeing, which includes our sufferings, is part of God's creative life, since it includes the finite as well as the infinite. The divine life, as it were, works through a separation and return to itself. Nonbeing is necessarily part of that process, but is eternally conquered by being. "Therefore, it is meaningful to speak of a participation of the divine life in the negativities of creaturely life. This is the ultimate answer to the question of theodicy."[155] God is present in everything, directing everything

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[151] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One,* 270.
[152] Tillich, *Eternal Now,* 45.
[153] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One,* 270.
[154] Ibid.
[155] Ibid.

towards fulfillment. Thus Tillich's ultimate answer to the question of theodicy rests on his treatment of providence, which we discussed in the previous section.

I have difficulty comprehending this response to the problem. In what meaningful way do we experience the connection of our destinies? What does it mean to say that the victims of war's devastation share a destiny with others who lead comfortable lives? How does a victim of the Holocaust, or of the ISIS genocide, participate in my destiny? When we confront the real suffering of people, how is this assumed unity of destinies more than a philosophical abstraction? It is difficult to understand what participation in each other's being means for people whose fates are so drastically different from one another.

Tillich's treatment of the question of theodicy is thus very limited. He has no response to natural evil, which he dismisses as simply part of creation. His response to moral evil is that of the vast majority of contemporary theologians: its existence is necessary to preserve human freedom of will. But can we really take free will as a value so absolute that it warrants the lack of protection of its victims from unrestricted violation? For the one who is violated, the necessity of another's free will is cold comfort.

Judeochristianity

While Tillich speaks of an “ultimate answer” to the problem of theodicy, we must say at the outset that there can be no ultimate answer. There is a reason people keep asking the question even though theologians have been answering it for centuries. No complete answer is possible as long as we still “see in a mirror, dimly” (1 Corinthians 13:12), for on this human plane we are meant to “walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7). Why? As we mentioned earlier, we are meant to cherish goodness for its own sake, even with no knowledge that the love of goodness confers any advantage whatsoever. Still, our faith can be fragile; it can break under the weight of the pain and grief we inevitably face as finite beings.

Therefore the question of theodicy does not require a thorough explanation, as if even that could provide us comfort. What we need is just a clue, something to go on, some hint of an ultimate order, so that even in the presence of suffering our faith can be preserved. What can we know about suffering that enables faith to survive?

The problem of theodicy has found its classical expression as follows. There are three assertions we would like to make about God and reality:

1. God is good.
2. God is all-powerful.
3. Evil exists.

Any two of these statements are consistent, but once we add the third, the problem arises: a good God who has the power to prevent extreme evil could not possibly permit it to exist (or so it seems).

Most attempts to solve the problem of theodicy do so by denying one of these three assertions, and thus restoring consistency. Let's look at each of the three possibilities.

1. Denying God's goodness. In the past, the absence of a good God found expression in polytheistic or dualistic religious systems. The question of theodicy would not have arisen in ancient Greece, where the gods were essentially human except for immortality. Ultimate goodness was not expected. Dualistic systems such as Zoroastrianism or Manichaeism gave us a battle between good and evil gods, the good one not always assured of victory.

Later on, particularly during the Enlightenment, the theology known as deism became popular. In deism God is like a watchmaker who just makes the watch and then is no longer involved with it. God is neither good nor evil; God just sets the world in motion and then lets it run by itself. We cannot have many expectations of a deistic God, so once again theodicy is not an issue.

Today in our scientifically sophisticated age, with naturalism the dominant philosophy especially in academia, if God appears at all it is often as a morally neutral life force. Nature just does what it does; it doesn't care about you or me. There is no morality in the animal kingdom, so why attribute morality to God? it is a human invention, as is any God whom we expect to care about us the way we try to care about each other.

These theologies are all internally consistent, but they are outside the traditions of Judaism and Christianity. According to those traditions God is actively involved in our lives. We do say that God cares about us, that God loves us, and whether we take

these statements literally or symbolically, they mean that there must exist in reality an ultimate goodness that has an effect on our daily lives. Denying God's goodness solves the contradictions within theism but at the expense of undermining any basis for faith.

2. Denying God's omnipotence. This approach has become very popular in our time. It takes essentially two forms: God's power is limited either because God lacks the ability to influence events, or because God chooses not to. Harold Kushner, whom we mentioned earlier, is a popular exemplar of both approaches (even though they are inconsistent). But by far the most common assertion is that God chooses not to act in order to protect human free will.

There are several problems with this response. As we noted earlier, it does nothing to explain natural evil, which has nothing to do with human free will. And as we also noted, there is a deeper problem:

> The issue is whether preserving this freedom at any cost can serve as a justification for divine inactivity in the face of radical evil.
>
> If God's allowing our free will to reign absolutely is an act of love towards us, what about love for the victims? Are they not God's children, too? God may be understood as a good parent, but would any sane parents allow their children to maim, rape, torture, and kill each other just for the sake of respecting their free will? The "free will" solution sets up a false dichotomy: that either we allow human free will or we don't. The obvious answer is to allow free will to operate but within limits. Is that not why we have laws?[156]

Free will absolutists don't like this suggestion. They believe that free will is sacrosanct, and that any limitation God may place upon it compromises it irretrievably. Nevertheless, human society places limitations on free will all the time. Should we instead be more like God and refrain from doing so? And couldn't God at least figure out a way to protect people from the more sadistic consequences of human free will? From

[156] Gourgey, *Judeochristianity,* 202.

the point of view of Judeochristianity, the free will explanation fails as a solution to the problem of theodicy.

3. Denying the existence of evil. While at first the suggestion that there is no evil might seem outlandish, its applications are actually not hard to find. A number of "metaphysical" theologies take the approach that what we experience as evil is not real; it is but an "appearance" or a product of our misdirected thinking. Such systems include Science of Mind, Unity, A Course in Miracles, Christian Science, and many others. There is no need to worry about evil because it doesn't really exist, and it is possible to come to know this through the proper training (there are shades of Gnosticism here). God is the only Mind, and once we know that, thoughts creating the illusion of evil disappear.

There are problems with this approach as well.

> If God is the only Mind, as metaphysics likes to claim, then how could erroneous thoughts even exist? "But they don't exist," is the usual answer, "they aren't real"—a disingenuous response, to say the least. Someone or something is conscious of these erroneous thoughts, or else we could not even talk about them. God certainly couldn't entertain them: God is Perfect Mind, and also the only creator. So there seems to be no possible way the illusions that create so much strife could even have arisen.[157]

Buddhism takes a similar approach, particularly in the doctrine of the "emptiness" or lack of intrinsic reality of all things. But Buddhism also denies evil in another way, in its doctrine of reincarnation. Since according to this doctrine all suffering is earned by misdeeds committed in a past life, there is really no evil, since we deserve everything bad that happens to us. Aside from the difficulties mentioned earlier, reincarnation leads

[157] Gourgey, *Judeochristianity,* 203.

to blaming suffering on the sufferer. There really is no such thing as the suffering of the innocent. In that sense, evil is denied.

These examples should be sufficient to show that the problem of theodicy in its classical formulation cannot be solved. But perhaps the problem lies within the question itself. We cannot ask the question "How can a good and all-powerful God permit the existence of evil?" without thinking of God as a self-conscious being with an autonomous will, which is another way of saying that God is a person. That assumption needs to be questioned. Even beyond this, when we ask the question of theodicy we are not looking for an intellectual explanation of the intricacies of God. It is not theological curiosity that drives us to ask the question of innocent suffering, but rather *compassion* and *fear:* compassion for the suffering of others, and fear of the uncertainties and ambiguities in our own lives.

We therefore need to address the real question behind the usual philosophical formulation, the question to which we really want and need an answer.

> And so the real question becomes: How can we make sense out of a dangerous world? How can we live our lives with confidence when terrible things happen with little predictability? And if we phrase our beliefs in terms of God, the question becomes: What can be the source of our faith? How can we maintain trust in God in spite of fear?[158]

This brings us back full circle to our main theme, faith. The problem of theodicy is not solved by a rational explanation of why God does what God does. It is resolved by finding a basis for preserving our faith in spite of suffering. And faith as we have defined it implies awareness of the power of Ultimate Goodness, an awareness which must coexist with the reality of suffering.

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[158] Gourgey, *Judeochristianity,* 205.

To understand how faith can be preserved in spite of suffering, we need to look more closely at three characteristics of faith: *awareness, self-honesty,* and *compassion.*

Awareness, specifically the awareness of the power of the eternal, is the essence of faith, as we have already established. This is a very high level of awareness, and does not come right away. Spiritual life actually begins with more basic levels of awareness, starting with the differentiation between self and not-self. Knowing one's boundaries, where one leaves off and others begin, is a normal stage of childhood development and also the most basic prerequisite for love. By its very nature love requires the awareness of the other. Awareness is essential for developing both faith and love.

And here the role of suffering is critical. Without suffering there can be no awareness. Even basic child psychology tells us this: if mother could fulfill perfectly every one of our needs, we would never become aware of her as anything but an extension of ourselves. The fact that she must inevitably fail, becoming in Winnicott's phrase the "good enough" rather than the perfect mother, brings us the pain of unfulfilled needs together with the awareness that the source of our expected need fulfillment is outside us and other than us, a separate person with needs of her own. Ideally the mother fails just enough to bring the child into awareness of the outside world without destroying the child's faith (trust) in its orderliness. And ideally this transforms the nature of the child's love, from loving one's mother because she fulfills one's needs to loving her as a person in her own right, as another individual.

This first experience of frustration, discomfort, or pain breaks us out our "dreaming innocence," to borrow Tillich's phrase. It is the beginning of the awareness of

self and other. And since love is the awareness of the individuality of the other, *there is no love without pain.* This is key to understanding the riddle of theodicy.

Self-honesty is awareness directed toward the self. It is the ability to question oneself, to stand outside oneself and observe, to view oneself critically. With this comes the ability not to project one's own reality onto others. This is another requirement for a love that can go beyond the self.

Awareness and self-honesty prepare us for the third key to faith, which is *compassion.* Compassion literally means "suffering with"; it is the ability to feel for others, to *be with* the pain of others. Compassion is not possible if we have not suffered ourselves, for then we would have no reference point. But there is no human life without suffering, thus no human life without the possibility of compassion.

Compassion is the link between suffering and love:

> Compassion is a form of love, and love is a form of awareness. If we are not aware of others as separate individuals with their own histories, interests, concerns, perceptions, needs, and fears—if we see them only in relation to ourselves—then we cannot love them. If we think that we love, most likely what we really love is a reflection or extension of our own self.[159]

Awareness brings us knowledge of and respect for the experiences of others. *Self-honesty* enables us to keep seeing others under their own individual light, not under ours. *Compassion* is awareness that has touched the heart. It is the beginning of non-self-interested love. Our own pain brings us out of ourselves and enables us to identify with the pain of others. Our heartfelt response is evidence of self-transcendence and a clue to the eternal presence.

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[159] Gourgey, *Judeochristianity,* 222.

We can now come close to appreciating what is perhaps the best way to view the riddle of theodicy: what redemptive meaning could even the worst suffering possibly have?

> Without suffering we would never develop the capacity for love. We have already observed that through suffering we become aware of others as separate from ourselves. More than that, if we did not experience suffering ourselves, we would not know what it might mean for someone else. We would be unable to understand or even see whole aspects of others' lives....
>
> Real love begins with compassion, and compassion begins with suffering: this is our greatest clue to unraveling suffering's mystery. Without suffering we would have no reason to seek outside ourselves, or even to become conscious of anything besides our own pleasure. Suffering forces us out of our shelters and makes us question. We question God, we question life, we question others, we question ourselves. And if we are fortunate, we find a connection between our own pain and the pain of others. We could not even see others if we didn't suffer. Suffering, used wisely, sheds its disguise to reveal itself not as the face of death but as the teacher of love.[160]

Without suffering, love would be impossible. The existence of suffering is not a reflection of the will of a deity who does not sufficiently care about us. Rather, reality itself is so structured that love, which rests upon awareness, can only come into existence through the experience of suffering. And as we have seen earlier, it is only non-self-interested love, and not even human freedom, that is the one unconditioned good. This is because non-self-interested love is the only pure good, with no dark side. It is the only good that needs no restrictions or conditions in order to remain good (for whenever love becomes destructive, it is no longer non-self-interested). This is the problem with the free-will response to theodicy: it elevates a relative good to the status of an absolute good. The only absolute good that we can know is non-self-interested love, which unlike human free will does not carry inevitable destructive consequences.

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[160] Gourgey, *Judeochristianity,* 222, 223.

Therefore non-self-interested love, and not human free will, is the only good that can provide us with even an incomplete and preliminary answer to the riddle of theodicy.

At this point we approach the paradoxical connection between suffering and faith. Earlier in the chapter on faith we established that non-self-interested love leads us to faith by giving us God's presence. It is now clear that without suffering non-self-interested love could not exist. And that becomes *an entrance to faith.*

> Faith is the awareness of God's presence in spite of overwhelming testimony to God's absence. If we can respond to suffering with love, we can come to an awareness of God's presence—because God is the source of that love and God is what we find when we know the kind of love that takes us beyond the self.[161]

The necessary connection between suffering and love helps us preserve our faith in God. Nevertheless, there are still and always will be difficulties. If we can respond to suffering by deepening our capacity for love, then we can actually gain a hint of redemption. But a question still arises, one that Tillich asked and that still cries out for an answer. It is the question of those whose life circumstances seem to put them beyond hope of any self-actualization.

> Nevertheless, even if it is possible to respond to suffering with compassion and faith, what about those who cannot so respond, who are so crushed by their circumstances that they seem to have no chance of moving beyond it? The tired cliché that "God never gives us more than we can handle" seems empty when we consider people whose lives have been destroyed by the worst atrocities imaginable. No conceivable explanation can be of much comfort under such circumstances.
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> The issue, however, is not comfort but faith. We cannot always expect to be comforted in this life. God has not promised always to be comforting but always to be faithful.[162]

There are a number of things to consider. Tillich makes an excellent point: we cannot really ask the question of theodicy from outside our own experience. We have

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[161] Gourgey, *Judeochristianity,* 234.
[162] Ibid., 238.

no way of judging the meaning or lack of meaning of another person's suffering. In my hospice experience I have seen people meet with faith many circumstances that outsiders might be convinced would shatter their own faith. We cannot carry another's cross. "When we view suffering from the outside, we can only see its pain, not its meaning."[163]

Another clue to consider is that every suffering, no matter how severe, is time-limited. I have seen people endure unimaginable pain and suffering, both physical and emotional, from cancer, and yet towards the very end they enter a profound state of peace that seems to make that former pain almost as if it never existed. If we could all know that is what lies ahead of us, facing pain and death would be just a little easier.

Tillich mentions the following conditions as excluding people from fulfillment in this life: "early death, destructive social conditions, feeble-mindedness and insanity"[164]; yet I have witnessed meaning in the lives of people suffering from all of these. The suffering and early death of children is something that especially distresses us, yet even there we can possibly find goodness and love. Lillian Ojeda was a seven-year-old girl in a hospital where I worked in the recreational therapy department when I was still in college. She was tiny and frail. She suffered from congestive heart disease and spent her life in and out of oxygen tents. Every day I would include her in my recreation therapy group.

One day she came in with her shoe laces untied, and told me she needed help. I bent down to tie them, and for a moment, tiny as she was, she hovered over me. Then I heard her say to me from above,

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[163] Gourgey, *Judeochristianity*, 239.
[164] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One,* 269.

“Charles, I know that you love me.”

I was struck speechless. This little girl had read my heart. I opened my mouth and nothing came out. She didn’t need a response. She just said,

“I love you too.”

Just a few days later, Lillian died.

For decades I have cherished that moment, and it still has a profound impact on my life. That child knew more about love than many learn who reach ten times her age. I knew then that the length of one’s life has nothing to do with its fulfillment. We all have different destinies, some requiring many years to fulfill, some requiring only a few; the important thing is to be open to our individual destiny. “Trust your journey,” as my spiritual director Julie Swanson used to tell me repeatedly.

Of course the challenge of theodicy does not stop there. We can easily point to very extreme human conditions, perhaps the worst being the genocides of modern times, and wonder how any presence of God could be possible. And yet there have been expressions of goodness, even in the concentration camps; people helping each other, sharing whatever meager resources they had. We have testimonies to this. Of course this does not justify anything, or erase the tragedy. But it does show that there is no condition or place that goodness, and therefore God, cannot be. And there may well be a reason why we cannot and perhaps never will be able to make sense of much of our suffering—that too is part of our training in love.

> We would love to have the assurance that everything we suffer will be compensated, that nothing we might have to suffer will exceed the limits of our tolerance, and that ultimately everything will make sense to us. But if we were able to suffer only on the terms of our own choosing, then suffering would lose its meaning; it would not offer us the same possibilities of awareness, strength, and love. A better question was asked by the Hasidic Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of

> Berdichev, who would cry out to God: "I do not wish to know why I suffer, but only that I suffer for your sake." Suffering cannot destroy goodness, and this can give us hope even during the worst.[165]

We cannot know the meaning of every suffering while still on this side of the boundary of life. But we do not need to know. We do not need the whole answer, but only the beginning of one.

> The problem of suffering cannot really be solved. If we view it theologically, it is a dead end; there is no way to blend God harmoniously with intractable, unmerited suffering. But if we view it existentially, then there is a way to preserve a sense of God's presence in spite of suffering. We don't need a solution, we just need a clue, something to keep us going, just enough to keep our faith from dying.[166]

While we are suffering it seems that our pain defines the whole of our reality, that it is all that was and ever will be. Yet it is a universal experience that the older we get, the faster time seems to run. At the very end of our lives, our entire lifetime may seem like a passing split second. And so it may well be in the context of eternity. This may be scant consolation to us now, but is still the hope of a realization to come: that like the many cancer patients I followed in hospice, the times of intense anxiety and pain will be inevitably succeeded by a period of profound peace. In *Sayings of the Fathers* (4:21) Rabbi Jacob says that this world is only a corridor leading to the truth that awaits us. The pain of this life is not the final word. And perhaps we can bear it a little more easily knowing that we do not suffer in order to preserve someone else's free will, but because without our pain there could never be love in this world.

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[165] Gourgey, *Judeochristianity,* 242.
[166] Ibid., 237.

Conclusion

I am grateful for the opportunity to clarify my own ideas in the light of the great theologian who has been my primary influence. Without Tillich's work there would be no Judeochristianity. Indeed, without Tillich's insights I would never have found Christianity attractive enough to want to make it part of my own theology.

In doing so I face a special challenge, which is not difficult to identify.

> I have called the approach I am taking here "Judeochristianity," and that name may be a liability. Christians may feel their Christianity is fine the way it is, and Jews may not want to hear anything about Jesus. Others may wonder if any of it is relevant to them. That would seem to leave me with a very small audience.[167]

It is not an easy sell presenting a theology stating that Jesus's teachings complete Hebrew prophecy and expecting it to have universal appeal. For centuries Jews have been told in a very insulting manner that Jesus completes them. I therefore feel great hesitation asking Jews to reconsider what Jesus stood for and how his relationship to Hebrew prophecy might add to their experience.

Entrance into the Christian community is an equal challenge. I am not nominally a Christian (even though I try to be a follower of Christ), and perhaps more to the point I am neither a Christian pastor nor a college or seminary professor. By profession I am a music therapist and now a nursing home resident advocate. So members of the Christian community might understandably wonder why they should read my book or listen to anything I have to say.

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[167] Charles Gourgey, "Why Judeochristianity?" last modified September 2011, http://www.judeochristianity.org/why_judeochristianity.htm.

Nevertheless, my marginal position might actually give me a different and useful perspective. Since I come to Christianity from the outside, I hope my view of Christian teaching will speak to other non-Christians and perhaps help heal the longstanding rift between Jews and Christians that has created so much Jewish antipathy towards Jesus.

In making this exploration I have tried to get to the heart of Jesus's teaching. I cannot escape the impression that the vast majority of theologizing about Jesus has served to obscure his message. And that must be why, in spite of Jesus's life and teaching, the history of Christianity has been so violent. Those who have so distorted Christ's message have, sorry to say, been aided and abetted by theologians. This especially applies to theologians who present a triumphalistic Christianity that is superior to all other traditions and therefore has no need of them. Indeed, Tillich has been strongly criticized by those (Barthians and others) who find his theology too apologetic. But fortunately, many Christians today are reconsidering the value of reconnecting Christianity to its Jewish roots.

It even seems to me, outsider that I am, that many of the staunchest defenders of Christianity do not really understand what they are defending. I have heard many say that if Jesus were not divine, or were it not for his death and resurrection, he would have been nothing special, no different from any other good man or teacher. Such statements leave me incredulous, wondering how these Christians can so badly fail to comprehend this man whom they revere.

> Many Christian apologists have stated that without his death and resurrection, indeed without his divine status, Jesus would have been nothing special, just another moral teacher. Such assertions represent a very superficial understanding of what Jesus taught. Jesus was not just an ordinary teacher. His

> roots are in Jewish prophecy; still, he was not like anyone else either before or since. His teachings were not only radical for his own time but for ours as well. It is so easy to hear them recited in churches without really considering what they mean, let alone putting them into practice. Jesus taught a different kind of love that challenges and stretches us even today: love of the stranger as if that stranger were family, love of the outcast, love beyond the limitations of self-interest, even to the point of committing everything we have to fulfilling it. We don't want to hear that message and we resist it, or we neutralize it by saying that it's no different from any other moral teaching.[168]

This is emphatically not to deny the importance of the death and resurrection of Jesus to Christians. Personally I believe there was a resurrection experience, though not a raising of a physical body. But that is not the point. The point is that regardless of what you may or may not believe about Jesus himself, it is his teaching that has redemptive power, and it is his teaching, not his death on the cross, that will save us, both here and in eternity, if we truly commit ourselves to it. Jesus said so himself when asked what one must do to inherit eternal life: Love God with all your might, and your neighbor as yourself.

It is clear that Jesus was no ordinary man. He must have had a special vocation from God to have brought us such a powerful and transformative teaching. When we reduce Jesus's message to that of any other great teacher we either ignore it or distort it. That is certainly much easier than trying to follow it! Evangelical Christianity has found a particularly ingenious way of neutralizing Jesus's message. It has turned the New Testament from a call to radical love into a manual for personal salvation. This creates a self-centered religion in which one's own eternal fate is the uppermost (or "ultimate") concern. To the contrary, it seems to me that true followers of Christ, practicing non-self-interested love, would show little interest even in their personal

[168] Gourgey, "Why Judeochristianity?"

salvation in comparison to the call to show love to others. That is the difference between a religion based on fear and one based on love. We should be called to love regardless of whether or not we think that love will save us in the end.

And this is where the exploration of a lifetime has brought me. I will leave the question of the divinity of Jesus for the individual to decide. But for me, because Jesus gave us a unique teaching with the power to save the world, he truly was the Messiah. As we have seen, even in Jewish tradition there is room for a Messiah who does not do all the work himself, but who leaves much of it up to us. And if we really took Jesus's teaching seriously, we could have a Messianic era. For that we need both to understand his message and to accept its call. And that is every bit as challenging today as it was in Jesus's time.

> Jesus fulfilled Messianic expectations by giving us all we need to bring about the change for which we hope. Love itself is not new, and as Jesus said, it is easy to love those who love us back, or who can pay us back. Non-self-interested love is something else entirely, and it took Jesus's ministry to bring us an awareness of it. And non-self-interested love, being the love that reflects God's own nature, is the only thing powerful enough to effect Messianic change.[169]

That is the core of Jesus's message, simple to state, but requiring a lifetime of devotion even to come close. The Vicarious Atonement Gospel will not get us there. The Faith-Not-Works Gospel will not get us there. The Prosperity Gospel will not get us there. Speculating about the Trinity will not get us there. The history of theology is full of distractions pulling us away from Jesus's call. As my Muslim friend Amina said, "It's so simple, but people make it all so complicated."[170]

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[169] Gourgey, "Jesus vs. Jews for Jesus."
[170] Gourgey, "Why Judeochristianity?"

And with good reason. The call to non-self-interested love turns society's values upside down. So today we see some people who profess their faith in Christ trying as hard as they can to deny health care to the poor, and to increase the income disparity that threatens our society—even finding religious rationalizations for it![171] Clearly we need a reading of the Gospels that brings us back to Jesus and what he truly stood for—as uncomfortable as that may (and should) make us.

The Messiah will not do all the work for us. The Messiah's only necessary task is to provide us with the tools to change the world ourselves. Because of Jesus we now have those tools. Jesus taught us, as no one else could, how to save the world. The rest is up to us. And for that, the world owes a debt not to Christianity only, but to Judaism as well.

> Jesus's prophecy is continuous with that of Isaiah. It is not opposed to Jewish tradition; it encapsulates it and extends it. The call to radical love as the aim of the law and fulfillment of the Covenant is a universal message, intended for everyone. To appreciate this fully one needs to respect both Jewish and Christian tradition—and to preserve them both, since each is needed for the light it sheds on Jesus's origins, life, teachings, and ultimate redemptive purpose.[172]

It is my hope that the perspective Judeochristianity offers will contribute to mutual understanding, reconciliation, and healing. There was never a greater need than we have right now.

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[171] Charles Gourgey, "Faith as Politics: The Religious Justification of Neglect," last modified April 2012, http://www.judeochristianity.org/faith_politics.htm.
[172] Gourgey, "Why Judeochristianity?"

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