

TILLICH and DALY: *The problem of idolatrous symbols in relation to the faith of the center of the personality and of the new ontological experience.*

Paul Tillich, in his book Dynamics of Faith, claims that the center of the personality both determines and is determined by the individual's ultimate concern. Tillich explains that the personality is comprised firstly of various "marginal concerns" which are defined as being finite, concrete, conditioned objects of the conscious drive, and secondly of an "ultimate concern" the contents of which would ideally be infinite, intangible, unconditioned subjects of the unconscious drive. It is in the ultimate concern that Tillich finds the contents of faith. The forms and concerns which engage an individual as objects of faith reveal the content (or subject) which is of ultimate concern to them, thereby revealing the center of their personality. The individual, as subject, is in a dynamic relationship with their object of faith; the person is known through their practices and pursuits, which are in turn determined by the extent to which the person knows themselves. When the object of faith is an ultimate concern with that which is not truly ultimate, then the center of the personality becomes imbalanced. Fuelled by unconscious drive, the need for a content for ultimate concern may motivate a person to become compulsively concerned with an issue or object which would otherwise be defined as being of the marginal type. Examples of this would be extreme nationalism or obsession with financial gain (to the exclusion of a more balanced set of priorities).

Without a truly ultimate object of faith, the center of the personality is revealed to be skewed; an imbalance which eventually causes the person to experience dissatisfaction and disillusionment in their "idolatrous" faith, the very nature of which further fuels the need for ultimacy. Another way in which an imbalanced center of the personality may occur is if the relationship with the ultimate concern is no longer a dynamic one. For example, a religion which has been adopted for the sake of family tradition may no longer hold meaning which speaks to the individual, or, a tradition may be in conflict with the individual's personal cognitive reality. Tillich feels strongly that the freedom to doubt and question the content of one's ultimate concern is intrinsic to being human and essential to maintaining a dynamic faith. If the ultimate concern takes the form of a belief system which represses the natural tendency to doubt and question and the need to satisfy our sense of reason, likely leading the believer to behave with self-righteousness, complacency or dogmatism, then Tillich would say this is an example of an idolatrous faith. The existential doubt inherent in a dynamic faith requires courage and risk because it must accept that the subject of true ultimate concern cannot be known in the same way as we can know the objects of our marginal concerns.

Within a religious community the language of mythical symbols gives a concrete representation of content to the act of faith. Because we cannot know the content of ultimacy in a literal way, spiritual

language represents for us our relationship with the unknowable. The human striving to be in such a relationship is a reflection of our desire to understand ourselves more deeply and also to be reminded that we may never know everything and in this way feel ourselves to be unlimited. Lack of courage in the face of the unknown leads us to objectify and concretize our symbols in a tendency which Tillich passionately warns us against. If we insist upon retaining a literal interpretation of our symbolic language, thus rejecting the scientific knowledge of contemporary society and denying our capacity for reason (our cognitive reality) then we succeed only in limiting ourselves to the finite contents of a language the very purpose of which is to lead us beyond our finitude. Secular, rationalist thinking would instead have us reject myth entirely in favor of a 'faith' in technological progress. As an alternative, Tillich suggests that we need to accept symbolic language as providing essential reference points in the actualization of our centers of personality and of our faith.

In keeping with the need for cognitive affirmation in this scientific age, Tillich insists on what he terms "broken myth". By this he means the recognition of the myth as a metaphorical story, and the understanding that its symbols transcend themselves in the same way that a window only has full meaning as 'window' if it is inseparable from the concept that its transparency reveals to us what lies beyond it. In order to avoid static, idolatrous forms of faith or to review and refresh existing symbols which have become reified, Tillich sees the need for a principle of criticism he terms "The Protestant Principle", through which the symbols representing ultimate concern would regularly be evaluated in an attempt to keep them vital and relevant in light of the ideals of absolute Truth, Justice and Freedom. This "creative holiness" pushes us to doubt, question, and grow beyond ourselves in reaching toward that which is truly ultimate. Because faith as ultimate concern is so inseparably linked to the center of the personality, it is necessary for the symbolic language of ultimacy to be open-ended enough to encompass each unique individual or group in the society. If this is not the case, then the symbols are too limited to be considered truly ultimate and the faith being symbolized is either an idolatrous one, or it is in need of a re-evaluation of its symbol system.

In her essay entitled *After the Death of God the Father*, Mary Daly points out that our society's male dominated structure has been supported by, and in turn supports, the idea of God-the-patriarch. Since the Judeo-Christian God has been so anthropomorphized as to actually be imagined by almost everyone as being male, and since in our society men and women are stereotypically opposite in character, we must ask ourselves in what way are women's centers of personality being addressed by this masculine God? As both women and men find that they are increasingly able to break out of their artificially imposed roles, the traditional Judeo-Christian symbols have come to seem too limited and limiting. For Daly this signals a need for new symbols which will be created out of the experience of the new human consciousness. Personally, I would suggest that as we begin to internalize the awareness

that men and women are not polar opposites but that in fact as individuals we share equal potential for all characteristics of personality, to object to a male God is merely a perpetuation of a polarizing attitude between the sexes. For this reason I do not, for instance, endorse the idea of replacing "God" with "Goddess".

As Daly asserts, however, we must realize that a fixation on any symbol is idolatrous and that authentic faith accepts the relativity of all symbols; a realization which allows us to apply the courage and risk of creative holiness in affirming ourselves and re-cognizing our God in such a way as to legitimize the intuition that all of humanity is created in God's image. As men and women of the New Age are reinventing what it is to be male and female, they are bringing a more open-minded and accepting consciousness to human society, and yet the narrow limits of our traditional Western theology do not validate the ontology of this 'new' individual. How can it be that we, as finite human beings, are capable of transcending ourselves while the symbols for our supposedly infinite ultimate concern remain ossified in a stale, outdated consciousness? Daly feels that a conceptualization of God and the surrounding religious language can only become truly ultimate if we acknowledge the oppressive imbalance inherent in the current 'supreme male' symbol. Women, as the oppressed and excluded in such an imbalance, have the ability and duty to remind society that God is supposed to be about the "beingness" of each of us and that to symbolize anything less than that is epitomized idolatry. The ontological experience of women coming from under the patriarchal system has revealed the need for a religiosity which encourages a commitment to social acceptance and the process of self-actualization of both women and men.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY:

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