

"THE GREAT CONVERSATION" AS ~~BRIDGE~~ CONSTRUCTION
(RE)CONSTRUCTION

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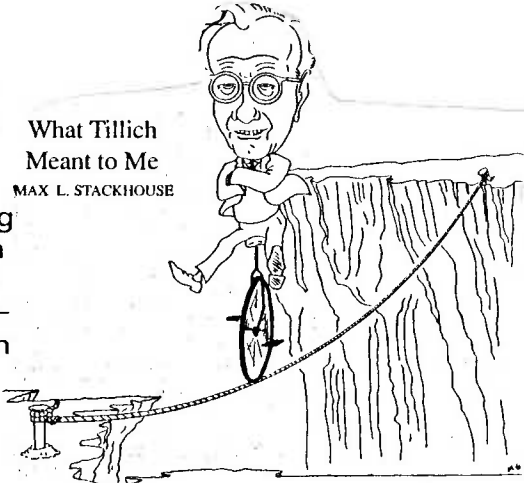
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An open letter to Max Stackhouse--stimulated by his
"What Tillich Meant to Me" (31 Jan 90 CHRISTIAN CENTURY)

Dear Max,

I'd avidly devoured your latest, & titled this Think-sheet, before the CENTURY cover-drawing got through to me: reading your intellectual-spiritual-ethical pilgrimage, some editor had formed in his/her mind the same image that had formed in mine. (It's the image I contributed to Craigville Colloquy VII's planning committee, where it applies in two senses: theological bridging between UCC & other Reformation churches, & bridging across "Justification & Justice." Bridger that you are, I hope you can participate in the Colloquy, as you did in last year's.)

This letter is a counterpoint exercise in hope of enriching my preparation (& perhaps some others!) for the Colloquy, the counterpoint being my i.-s.-e. pilgrimage laid alongside yours.



What Tillich
Meant to Me
MAX L. STACKHOUSE

1. What's quoted in the Thinksheet title is a phrase I heard often when in the '41 U. of Chicago Robt. M. Hutchins / Mortimer Adler Great Books Seminar. We 60, sitting around an oval table, interviewed numerous intellectuals who'd written not-far-from great books (incl. the Thomists Maritain & Gilson). Always there was the excitement, joy, even awe at the privilege of being in "the great conversation," which primarily meant reading the (mainly Western) classics, which under H. & A. came out as a 52-vol. set, incl. A.'s 2-vol. SYNTOPICON--but secondarily it meant tangling with H. & A. & their guests, & watching H. & A. tangle with each other (verbal pyrotechnics deluxe!). The more pious among us called it "playing in the intellectual fields of the Lord." Certainly it was that for me. The sessions, for me, were prayermeetings, including praying that I'd not get too badly mashed when voicing a challenge....The pertinence to your article? It called to my mind that seminar's excitement, joy, awe as you wrote of your mentors, how you masticated them thoroughly & spit out what you couldn't (at least at the time) digest. You mention the diverse intellectual roots of your college teachers (BU personalists, Yale, Chicago, "political Niebuhrians"): "The battles of the Titans confirmed my fear that faith and reason pressed in contrary directions." And you recount your choosing reason till Tillich built a bridge for you over to faith. (A bridge, I say, not a boat: Tillich accused Barth of having built a boat, leaving reason to land on the short of faith [though as far as I can recall, from reading & hearing him, I'm not aware he used this analogy].)

2. One factor inclining our [UCC] church to attending more to **justice** than to **justification** is this: being in the public domain, justice as idea & as action is less confessional than is justification (which signals the whole biblical Story), more rational, more amenable to conversation & joint action with "the world," including other religions, & less embarrassing ("fools for Christ")--more distancing from "the religious right" (with all its negative connotations for us liberals & liberal evangelicals).

3. In the '60s (on UCC national staff) & '70s (teaching at NYTS) I encountered many who, like you, made a faith journey from *iustitia* to *pietas*, from "religion experienced primarily in the prophetic struggle for justice and peace" (#545 [herewith], one of eight ways of being religious) to some historical piety (Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism were the three destinations, in order of numbers, I observed directly). We could use a well-researched book enumerating the **bridges** this small multitude crossed on that pilgrimage. Your bridge was marked "Tillich": "He helped me join *pietas* and *intellectus* [faith & reason] as a basis for *veritas* [truth] and *iustitia* [justice] in a way I once doubted was possible" (your last sentence). "He made it possible for me to become a Christian....More, he made the quest for an apologetic, cosmopolitan Christian social ethic imaginable."

4. If I read you right (in your writings, face-to-face, & by reputation), "an apologetic, cosmopolitan Christian social ethic" is your dream, goal, life-task. Add an apologetic, cosmopolitan Christian theology & we have the work of the Christian intellectual for our time. Rough verbal signals for the two aspects are (for the first) **justice** & (for the second) **justification**. Our UCC self-understanding squarely includes the first, & increasingly (despite American anti-intellectualism & pragmatic liberalism's disdain for "abstractions") is taking the second seriously (as instance the Colloquies). I'm justly proud of our church for caring concretely about what's happening to human beings, though I'm ashamed there's so little *intellectus* in the *actus* & so much ideology (liberal "presumption" [in Wogaman's sense], prejudgment, prejudice, "pre-position" [in my sense, #2394.8]). I long for wholeness of witness & work, that we worship the Lord our God with all: when on one occasion I stopped there instead of going on to "...mind...strength," a rabbi said "That's a good translation of the Hebrew!"

5. A spiritual flaw, arrogance, is at the root of all fundamentalisms, left as well as right. Against it, the Testaments teach **penitent humility**, of which our church could use more as we struggle toward spiritual-intellectual unity internally & with other churches. In this work, we need the paradoxical sense that grace is limitless & we are many-wise limited (more a Niebuhrian than a Tillichian thought). In coming upon Ro.7¹⁷ in my daily reading this morning, I was struck by Zink's tr. of ἀμαρτία *peccatum*: "die dunkle Macht, der böse Wille" (the dark power, the evil will; Luther's influence on Zink's DAS NEUE TESTAMENT, yes; but also Bonhoeffer's). Tillich is right that we cannot, & must not try to, leave autonomy backward into heteronomy; but journeying forward into theonomy requires, in addition to theological acuity (for which Tillich is a model), anti-Enlightenment penitent humility (for which he's not: not in my face-to-face with him, not in my reading of him).

6. Which brings me to the difference between you & me on Tillich. For you, he was **salvific guru**, the bridge to faith; & I thank God you found a παιδαγωγός (Gal.3²⁴), a "mentor" in the sense Robt. Bly (PBS '89 with Moyers, "A Gathering of Men") uses the term: for males, the male steppingstone or intermediary between father & God. For me, that mediator's name was Ridley (my Sunday School teacher, Boy Scout leader, & [with his wife] part payer of my college expenses): for you, that mediator's name was Tillich, whom you encountered much later in life. Our fathers, yours & mine? Of similar mind, yours a pastor & mine a judge. But, a huge difference: you lost yours just before college; I lost mine when I was 55 & teaching in U. of Hawaii. If I'd lost father when young, as you did, would I have lost Father also, as you did? (Ah, one of those intelligent answerless questions! Unless you see the answer, as I do, in a fresh experience of limit, & therefore a further invitation to humility.)...Can we gain anything from extrapolating to the horde of children who, in effect where not in fact, never had a father? And can any good word be said here for patriarchy while we continue trendily to badmouth it?...You moved leftward politically & religiously; I only politically: religiously, I moved rightward into several years of scribal (inerrantist!) fundamentalism till its intellectual dishonesty became unbearable, then into my own version of libergelicalism, where I've been for ½ century.

7. Tillich to me? I may be reading into this cover-drawing, but here goes: he's a bridger, but also a tightrope artist. For me he was/is little of the first & much of the second. I'm in sympathy with his project, & see it as having the dis/advantages of Schleiermacher's efforts to reach, 2 cs. ago, "religion's cultured despisers." But I'm out of sympathy with those who've tried to construct a religion on his intellection--yet I hesitate to be too critical: Tillichianism has served for some, as fundamentalism did for me, as a pontoon bridge to forgotten, or never known, riches. "Anything to get you through the night," as I once quoted Ol' Blue Eyes Sinatra in THE FELLOWSHIP OF PRAYER. "Our little systems have their day,...."....I just pawed through the Tillich section of my library to see if I might come upon a change of mind about him. Nope. Who needs him? You did, not me--not much, anyway. I like his refusal to escape from ontology (a la liberalism), I don't like his becoming idolatrously enmired in it. I do like his biblical seriousness about human suffering: I can still see him telling the story of the teenage soldier dying in his arms when he was a WWI chaplain. Now the world, the human world & the environment, is dying in our arms....