SYNCRETISM OR CORRELATION: TEILHARD AND TILLICH'S CONTRASTING METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO SCIENCE AND THEOLOGY

by Michael W. DeLashmutt

Abstract. I revisit Paul Tillich's theological methodology and contrast his practice of correlation with the syncretistic methodological practices of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. I argue that the method of correlation, as referred to in Robert John Russell's 2001 *Zygon* article, fails to uphold Tillich's self-limitation of his own methodology with regard to Tillich's insistence upon the theological circle. I assert that the theological circle, as taken from Tillich's *Systematic Theology I*, is a central facet within his methodology and that this often-ignored concept needs to be resuscitated if one is to remain authentically Tillichian in one's approach to the science-and-theology dialogue.

Keywords: Christology; cosmology; Albert Einstein; evolution; David Klemm; method of correlation; religion; Robert John Russell; science; syncretism; Pierre Teilhard de Chardin; theological circle; theological method; theology; Paul Tillich.

My research on Paul Tillich and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin began as an attempt to understand the ways in which they uniquely approached the science-theology dialogue in their own day. My original assumption was that the only difference between their works would be the objects of their scientific inquiry—evolution for Teilhard, and what I hypothesized to be post-Einsteinian cosmology for Tillich. What I discovered was not just a topical difference but a radical distinction in their various perspectives on the science-theology interface. Identifying this difference has extensive implications for the use of Tillich in this dialogue as it stands today.

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Teilhard and Tillich were both keenly aware of the important role that science and technology played within culture. In order to present a theology that was in keeping with an increasingly scientific worldview, both scholars accommodated scientific and technological language within their theologies. For them the language of the sciences opened a new world of theological investigation and increased the viability of theological discourse in an increasingly skeptical and disinterested culture. Yet, the extent to which their respective theologies accommodated scientific language contrasts greatly.

The chief difference is methodological. Teilhard's approach, as both a paleontologist and a theologian, was to integrate not only the language of science but also the ideas, concepts, and goals of a scientific worldview. Science contributed greatly to the development of his theology, both in regard to his scientifically informed anthropology and his cosmic eschatology. Likewise, Teilhard's pursuit of the sciences was radically altered by its encounter with confessional Christian theology.

Despite sharing a similar interest in science and theology, Tillich's methodological approach to this interchange was radically different. Whereas Teilhard practiced what I see as a wholesale syncretism of science and theology, Tillich's later definition of the method of correlation clearly prohibited such a coupling. The separation between science and theology can be highlighted in Tillich by his reference to the "theological circle"—the semipermeable membrane that protects the theologian-qua-theologian from becoming theologian-cum-scientist. The theologian's place within the theological circle forces his engagement with other disciplines to occur only within the realm of theological reflection.

I argue that if the science-and-theology dialogue is to continue using Tillich's method of correlation as a foundation for theological method, to be true to Tillich it must begin to use his concept of the theological circle. To illustrate my point I refer to Robert John Russell's article "The Relevance of Tillich for the Theology and Science Dialogue" (2001) and argue that the approach taken by him, though viable and valuable, is not Tillichian, or at least not Tillichian in respect to his *Systematic Theology* I.

Teilhard: Syncretism in Science and Theology

Teilhard in *Christianity and Evolution* asks, "What form must our Christology take if it is to remain itself in a new world?" (1969, 76) The new world that Teilhard identifies is a world aware of its own evolutionary history. Gone is the naive belief in a primal origin of the world founded in the unmediated creative activity of the Divine. The new world's creation myth is based on a collection of random chances, not inspired by a belief in the intentional activity of the finger of God. Because of Teilhard's intellectual commitments—one to the natural sciences and the other to the faith of the Jesuit Order—he needed a Christology that met "the require-

ments of a world that is evaluative in structure" (1969, 78). At stake for Teilhard was nothing less than the very efficacy of Christian worship, for "if a Christ is to be completely acceptable as an object of worship, he must be presented as the savior of the idea and reality of evolution" (1969, 78).

In order to make sense of evolution in light of Christian theology, Teilhard made accommodations both to strict evolutionary theory and to Christian cosmology and Christology. His was a christocentric view of evolution: "[I]t is then, in this physical pole of universal evolution that we must . . . locate and recognize the plenitude of Christ . . . no other type of cosmos, and in no other place, can any being . . . carry out the function of universal consolidation and universal animation which Christian dogma attributes to Christ" (Teilhard 1970, 68).

Christ's place in the evolutionary process is described by Teilhard variously as "the Omega Point," *Christus Evolutur*, and "the Cosmic Christ." Indeed, cosmicizing Christ is equally crucial for both Teilhard's Christology and his understanding of evolutionary theory.

According to Teilhard, Christ is the energy behind all cosmic history; he is both the source and goal of human existence. "Christ occupies for us, *hic et nunc* [everything and nothing] as far as position and function are concerned. . . . [He is] the place of the point Omega" (quoted in Wildiers 1968, 135). All of existence is held together by Christ and culminates in him. The whole of cosmic history points toward its fulfillment in the unification of all humanity (and the cosmos) into the eschatological community of which Christ is the head.

By ascribing to Christ the title of "Omega Point," in his vernacular Teilhard is saying that Christ is the zenith of cosmic history. All things are created in him and are destined for unification with him. Christ as endpoint signifies the end of evolution but, more important, implies that evolution has some defined goal to which it strives. In Christ, at the end of time and space, all the vastness of cosmic disparity will end in ultimate unity and unification. Time and space converge onto the Omega Point inasmuch as evolution's goal is met in the person of the Cosmic Christ, the very meaning of history.

Teilhard's contribution to twentieth-century thought cannot be minimized. He recognized the impact that scientific discovery makes upon culture and theology believing that science and theology could coexist without each jeopardizing the unique place of the other. Teilhard's question "Why must Christ be revealed in the evolutionary process?" can be answered simply enough: Humanity's discovery of the evolution of all life forces theology to reunderstand Christ's role in the universal and multifarious variations of this life.

Yet, no matter how noble it may appear, Teilhard's position is plagued by two crucial problems which are the direct result of his wholesale syncretism of science with Christian theology.

First, Teilhard's reading of evolution through Christology assigns to the cosmic work of Christ a maleficence of character. I find Jürgen Moltmann's critique of Teilhard to be helpful at this point. In *The Way of Jesus Christ* (1993)[1] he agrees with Teilhard that there are benefits to be found in speaking of Christ in cosmic terms, but he firmly disagrees when it comes to identifying Christ with the force behind evolution. Moltmann is concerned that Teilhard's position prioritizes the goal of evolution over and against the "myriads of faulty developments and the victims of this process [who] fall hopelessly by the wayside" (p. 292).

The second problem with Teilhard's theory stems from the teleological claims he makes regarding the evolutionary process itself. With the exception of proponents of intelligent design or the so-called anthropic principle, evolutionary teleology is nearly unanimously decried by contemporary evolutionary biologists and theorists today.

If the idea of Christ as the agent of evolutionary selectivity is unacceptable to theology, and if a teleological view of evolution is no longer in scientific vogue, we must ask ourselves if there is any value to be had in attempting to create a synthesis of evolution and Christology or, for that matter, of science and theology. I argue that there is no benefit to be found in synthesizing the two, at least in respect to the methodology employed by Teilhard. Rather, I suggest that the best option for a true dialogue between science and theology is one that honors Tillich's method of correlation—his insistence upon the theological circle.

Tillich: Self-limited Correlation in Science and Religion

According to Tillich, a theological system is first of all a "function of the Christian church." As such, theology must "serve the needs of the church," which implies that it must "satisfy two basic needs: the statements of the truth of the Christian message and the interpretation of this truth for every new generation" (Tillich 1964a, 3). By making the church and the "spiritual life of the church" the domains of systematic theology, Tillich situates all theological dialogue within the milieu of confessional faith. But the ecclesial situation in which theology arises is not set apart from greater cultural influences. Theology when communicated to "every new generation" must take a detour through categories of culture in order for its message to remain contemporaneous within the situation of the church. To do so, theology incorporates the categories, though not the content, of other cultural forms.

Tillich's self-styled theology is apologetic—that is, it addresses the common ground between the situation of theology and the situation of culture. But the nature of this apologetic theology is one that engages with culture only in a self-limited fashion. According to Tillich, a theologian's

practice of correlation can proceed only from within the domain of the theological circle. Any casual reader of Tillich's theology will note that his work perennially explores the relationship between theology and a variety of alternative disciplines including science, philosophy, sociology, and depth psychology. Though these disciplines are helpful in explaining certain domains of reality, they leave bobbing in their wake basic yet unanswered questions about the existential situation of humanity—questions that a kerygmatic/apologetic theology gladly answers through the structure of Christian revelation (Tillich 1964a, 59ff.). Though there may be a close relationship between these various disciplines and theology, they are separate on two fronts: their differing functions (the kinds of questions they ask) and their differing objects (the kind of answers they seek). For Tillich, a Christian theologian approaches the objects of all other disciplines only through the lens of theological symbolism (1964a, 29).

Tillich is resolute that Christian theology can have no other object (or "content") besides the object of ultimate concern. A theology that remains within the theological circle can never function in an authoritative way in matters of penultimate or "preliminary" concern. This includes the arenas of aesthetics, science and physical theory, artistic creation, historical conjecture, medical healing, social reconstruction, and political and international conflicts (1964a, 15). For Tillich, there is no *theological* art, *theological* science, *theological* history, *theological* medicine, *theological* sociology, or *theological* politic: "The theologian as theologian is no expert in any matters of preliminary concern. And, conversely, those who are experts in these matters should not as such claim to be experts in theology. The first formal principle of theology, guarding the boundary line between ultimate concern and preliminary concerns, protects theology as well as the cultural realms on the other side of the line" (1964a, 15).

Tillich provides us with myriad examples in which we can observe how the method of correlation and the theological circle are implemented in his pursuit of interdisciplinary dialogue. For the sake of brevity, I discuss here what I consider to be one of the more important examples, his essay "Science and Theology: A Discussion with Einstein" (1964b). In this brief work, Tillich approaches key theological questions that Einstein has raised and engages in a robust theological apologetic. It is important to note that Tillich does not remove himself from the theological circle but remains resolutely (and confessionally) theological. The catalyst for Tillich's essay was a speech by Einstein in which he rejected the belief in a personal God. The four grounds upon which Einstein based his position were in no way new or innovative but demanded attention nonetheless, as such statements "became significant" coming from the "mouth of Einstein, as an expression of his intellectual and moral character" (Tillich 1964b, 127).

According to Einstein, the idea of a personal God was not an essential part of religion. Rather, he saw it as a vestigial doctrine left over from

primitive religious superstition. In light of our modern condition, this belief was seen as not only self-contradictory (inasmuch as a supreme being such as God could not possibly be both perfect and personal) but also contradictory to the scientific worldview that Einstein wished to promote. By making such statements, Einstein as a physicist-cum-cultural icon moved from the scientific circle of his own discipline into the domain of Tillich's theological circle. In this context Tillich's apologetic and kerygmatic theology could truly engage with the ultimate concern conveyed by Einstein's science. Tillich argues on theological grounds that Einstein's claims regarding the self-contradictory and scientifically contradictory aspects of the belief in a personal God were based on Einstein's misunderstanding of "personal god."

The relationship between science and theology is a tenuous one, but Tillich's example shows that this relationship is best experienced when each partner shows respect for the other's area of specialty. Just as science cannot speak authoritatively to theology, theology cannot build doctrinal affirmations upon "the dark spots of scientific research" (Tillich 1964c, 129). Furthermore,

> theology . . . must leave to science the description of the whole of objects and their interdependence in nature and history, in man and his world. And beyond this, theology must leave to philosophy the description of the structures and categories of being itself and of the *logos* in which being become manifest. Any interference of theology with these tasks of philosophy and science is destructive for theology itself. (Tillich 1964b, 129)

This does not mean that science and philosophy are worthless endeavors; on the contrary, Tillich asserts here that theology, science, and philosophy simply pursue different kinds of questions and purvey different kinds of answers. Tillich acknowledges that science can potentially lead one to the "experience of the numinous" (1964c, 131) and to an awareness of the groundless ground of being; at this turn, however, the scientific enterprise becomes a theological conveyance. The theological meaning arises from such inquiries when the experience of scientific discovery is mediated through personal, communal, and ritual religious experiences that convey cultural events (such as scientific discovery) through the experience of religious presence in symbolic forms.

In examining the way in which Tillich engages with Einstein in this instance, we see an example of his own use of the theological circle. According to the rule of the circle, Tillich's method of correlation functions only at the point of synapse between science and theology, not in a viral encounter, conquest, or merger of the two disciplines. Tillich's theology answers science when science poses to theology a challenging question. Science, as a cultural force, can convey ultimate concern, and it is only at this juncture that it can be addressed by theological language. Moreover, Tillich's approach hints at the nature of the different epistemological struc-

tures of scientific and theological language. For Tillich, "scientific language is predominantly calculating and detached and religious language is predominantly existential or involved" (Tillich 1988, 162). Furthermore, he asserts that science and theology describe two different "dimensions" of reality. Science deals with interrelations within the finite dimension, and theology and religion concern themselves with the dimension of meaning and being in the infinite dimension. Speaking about one dimension is rather different than speaking about the other (1988, 161).

Bringing Back the Circle

I argue that, for Tillich to be properly used within interdisciplinary discourse, the role of the theological circle must be recognized. However, my position is not held unanimously by Tillich scholars or by those interested in the science-theology dialogue. In particular, it stands in tension with Russell, who in a 2001 article in *Zygon* makes some very insightful observations about the role that Tillich's method of correlation can play in this emerging interdisciplinary field. It is with much respect for Russell's work and a measure of humility that I offer the following corrective opinion.

I agree with Russell that Tillich could be useful for this contemporary dialogue, but I disagree with his use of Tillich and in particular with his modification of the method of correlation. Throughout the article Russell takes a somewhat selective attitude toward Tillich's methodology; he retains aspects of Tillich that suit his interdisciplinary interests and discards those that do not. To this end, his analysis is without any reference to the theological circle, which I believe is the chief difference between Tillich's engagement with the sciences and the syncretism embodied by the work of Teilhard.

Russell argues that for science and theology to have a fruitful conversation the "dialogue requires cognitive input from both sides" (2001, 270). According to him, such a conversation is facilitated best by Tillich's method of correlation, which he thinks can be seen as a "precursor of what is now one of the most productive methodologies in the growing interdisciplinary field of theology and science" (p. 270). Furthermore, he argues that a "theological methodology . . . should be, and in fact already is, analogous to scientific methodology" (p. 270). His position is influenced by other forms of epistemic ordering found in the work of such science-minded theologians as Nancey Murphy, John Polkinghorne, and Arthur Peacocke. Moreover, making theological method subordinate to scientific method is also similarly advocated by David Klemm and William Klink in their *Zygon* article (2003) that explores the possibility of science-based theological modeling. According to Russell, the open dialogue presently experienced between the sciences and theology is a creative mutual interaction that can be credited to Tillich's work in the method of correlation, especially from *Systematic Theology* I (Russell 2001, 270).

To express his position, Russell cites the work of Ian Barbour and others regarding the similarities between science and theology, namely, that doctrines can be read as scientific hypotheses that are held "fallibly and constructed in light of the data of theology . . . a combination of scripture, tradition, reason, personal and community experience, and the encounter with the world culture and with nature, including the discoveries and conclusions of the social, psychological and natural sciences. They are held seriously but tentatively, and they are open to being tested against such data" (Russell 2001, 273). Furthermore, according to Russell, theological doctrines must be allowed to stand or fall on the basis of developments in the natural sciences: "the theories and discoveries of cosmology, physics, evolutionary and molecular biology, anthropology, the neurosciences, and so on, should serve as crucial sources of data for theology, both inspiring new insights and challenging traditional, outmoded conceptions of nature" (p. 273).

Russell acknowledges that scientists such as "Schrödinger, Einstein, Bohr, and Hoyle" (p. 277) were all shaped by either a religious or philosophical prescientific disposition. These dispositions affected the way in which these scientists engaged with their fields of research. Yet beyond theology's tacit impact, Russell seems to encourage even more input from the part of the theologian. The dialogue he calls for between science and theology is one that is situated within an "open intellectual exchange between scholars, based on mutual respect and the fallibility of hypotheses proposed by either side, and based on scientific or theological evidence" (p. 276).

At first glance, this seems like an amenable solution. After all, it seems only fair that if theology is going to be dictated to by the sciences, the sciences should be required to listen to theology as well. Would this not indicate an egalitarian remedy to the problem of an epistemological hierarchy in which scientific knowing is placed above all else? Indeed, this would almost appear to be a form of correlation, dialogue, interchange, or meeting in which seemingly disparate disciplines converge and learn from one another in a kind of academic *koinonia*. Though this is certainly a viable option for the science-and-theology dialogue to pursue, Tillich's method of correlation does not allow for this kind of interpenetration.

Russell creates a distillation of Tillich's methodology and applies it selectively to his own interests in science and theology. Significantly missing in his approach is any mention of the theological circle. Although in early and later Tillich the theological circle is less emphasized, leaving the door open to interdependent dialogue between theology and other disciplines, in the Tillich of *Systematic Theology* I—the primary Tillich source used by Russell in his article—the theological circle prohibits the type of ideological syncretism that Russell is espousing.

Russell's position fails to recognize that the underlying foundation of Tillich's theological circle is the belief that theology, as based upon revela-

tion, experiences "knowing" in a different way than do the sciences.[2] Tillich states that "knowledge of revelation does not increase our knowledge about the structures of nature, history, and man" (1964a, 129). Revelation and the miraculous operate on a level that points to the "mystery of being" yet does not contradict "the rational structure of reality." This implies that revelatory events are ontologically disconnected from natural events. Nonetheless, miracles, religious ecstasy, and revelation do not destroy the "structure of cognitive reason"; thus, Tillich implores the reader to allow such events to remain open to "scientific analysis and psychological, physical . . . [and] historical investigation." Tillich encourages this kind of investigation because he is confident that

> revelation belongs to a *dimension of reality* for which scientific and historical analyses are inadequate. Revelation is the manifestation of the depth of reason and the ground of being. It points to the mystery of existence and to ultimate concern. It is *independent of what science and history* say about the conditions in which it appears; and it cannot make science and history dependent on itself. No conflict between different dimensions of reality is possible. Reason receives revelation in ecstasy and miracles; but reason is not destroyed by revelation, just as revelation is not emptied by reason. (1964a, 130–31; emphasis added)

Tillich's use of multiple dimensions of reality facilitates his method of correlation by preventing claims to "truth" (in the sense of the ultimate) from being made contingent upon the preliminary, thus prohibiting one from reverting to what Russell terms "epistemic reduction" (2001, 280). Yet, despite the fact that Russell is quick to laud Tillich's multidimensionality as a panacea for epistemic reduction, he contradicts Tillich's overall methodology by asserting that "scientific theories" may "offer modest and indirect support to theological theories by serving as data to be explained theologically or as data which then tends to confirm theology" (2001, 280).

Russell seems to wish to encourage an open dialogue between science and theology in which theology can offer theologically inspired scientific observations to science, and science can offer scientifically inspired theological observations to theology. However, Russell leaves the theologian severely limited in his or her ability to contribute to this dialogue. Such an asymmetrical type of relation allows theologians a limited voice when engaging with the sciences. In one example, he relates how a theologian may engage with a physicist, but the theologian's engagement is crippled because he is forbidden from appealing to "some special kind of authority, whether based on scripture, church dogma, magisterial pronouncements, or whatever" (Russell 2001, 280). In light of this epistemic limitation I wonder whether a theologian would have anything sensible to say at all. With scripture, dogma, and pronouncements removed from the theologian's cache, on what basis does a theologian speak? Theological proclamations are based on divine revelation. Such revelation is assigned by the community a special kind of authority, which is necessarily considered to be either

"magisterial" or "scriptural." If theology is to follow a scientific methodology that uses scientific forms of verification, how can theories-*cum*-doctrines be created without these essential elements? It would seem that in this kind of relationship, the confessional theologian has little room to work. Although secular theology could thrive in this environment, the type of theology Tillich offers us is removed by Russell from its ecclesial and communal context and thus loses its kerygmatic edge.

By making science and theology interdependent dialogue partners, one fails to uphold Tillich's ideal of the theological circle and in so doing disregards his basic belief that theological truth is different from scientific truth. We learn from Tillich that religious truth claims describe the world in different ways than scientific truth claims do. The theologian bases propositions on experience of ultimate concern (communal, individual, or historical) and operates within a world of texts, myths, and interpretations of culture. The hypothesis of Christian ecumenism—*credo in Deum Patrem* (I believe in God the Father)—cannot be dissected in the laboratory for analysis; it is simply believed in faith.

The problem of a Tillichian correlation transforming into a Teilhardesque syncretism is reminiscent of the 2003 debate opened in *Zygon* regarding the efficacy of theological modeling. Klemm and Klink argue that theological propositions can be defended from a methodological position that is similar to that used by the sciences. In response, Langdon Gilkey gives a poignant warning:

> there is at best only an *analogy* between the cognition achieved in science and that sought for in theology. . . . I believe that we can in truth speak of cognition, of knowledge, and of truth in the area of theology; but we need to be very careful neither to claim it to be too similar to scientific cognition nor to deny any possibility of cognition. Above all, we need to recognize that there are seemingly different levels of truth and so different modes of cognition and of knowledge at best analogical to one another. (Gilkey 2003, 533)

Conclusion

In the context of the science-and-theology dialogue it would seem that the example of Teilhard's syncretism is often mistakenly read into Tillich's method of correlation. If we really wish to use Tillich for this dialogue, I suggest that we pause and reflect upon his own words regarding the problems of interdisciplinary epistemology: "Attempts to elaborate a theology as an empirical-inductive or a metaphysical-deductive 'science,' or as a combination of both, have given ample evidence that no such attempt can succeed" (Tillich 1964a, 11).

As Tillich would have understood it, apologetic/kerygmatic theology is based on an epistemology that is more about an ontological encounter with ultimate concern than it is about acquired knowledge based on deduction. The risk in too closely knitting the content of theology with the content of

the sciences is the reduction of the ontic nature of theological experience to the noetic and epistemological nature of scientific deduction.

Theological discourse is not something that is grasped firmly in the hand but rather something that is accepted from the stance of a second naivete. This does not mean that theology cannot cope with (or appropriate) certain aspects of the sciences, as they reflect an overarching form of cultural habituation, but it does imply that if theology is to be true to its message and history it must remain dedicated to the existential and the symbolic. Science, with its emphasis on epistemological certainty, deduction, and empiricism, does not often leave room for the symbolic, existential, or transcendental nature of theology.

In 1958, when Tillich's innovative theology was seen as either being a step forward in translating Christian theology into the parlance of the world or a step backward in sacrificing the kerygma at the altar of culture, an editor at *Theology Today* wrote that he wondered "whether in representing and translating the Gospel for our day Tillich actually provides new meaning for old truth or only succeeds in perverting and distorting what is essentially Christian" (Kerr 1958, 10). I wonder, in light of the present use of Tillich in the science-and-theology dialogue, whether, representing and translating Tillich for our own day, the science-and-theology dialogue provides new meaning of old truth or succeeds only in perverting and distorting what is essentially (or existentially) Tillichian.

NOTES

A version of this essay was presented at the Tillich and Teilhard Session of the North American Paul Tillich Society Meeting held during the American Academy of Religion Meeting, Atlanta, Georgia, 21 November 2003.

1. In his essay "Hope and History" (1968) Moltmann criticizes the worldview from which Teilhard develops his theology. He argues against a cosmological metaphysic in which God's existence is proved through phenomenology, because humanity's identity is no longer rooted in a connection with the cosmos *qua* cosmos.

2. Tillich argues for the theological circle as a means of providing an alternative compromise to the conflicting theological epistemologies of Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann. This issue became less pressing in Tillich's later work, so the theological circle is not as prevalent a theme. Despite this, I contest that the theological circle remains an important issue when one considers implementing a Tillichian methodology.

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