

Tillich the Rationalist

Systematic Theology (Vol. III), by Paul Tillich. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963. 484 pp. \$6.95.

THE APPEARANCE of this third volume of Paul Tillich's *Systematic Theology* concludes his broad survey of Christian doctrine. It is undoubtedly an impressive achievement, but the critical reviewer may well question its timeliness. Certainly Dr. Tillich has seemed to many people to speak with especial clarity to his own generation; yet in fact, despite the obvious relationship to a good deal of contemporary existentialist thought and a profound and imaginative handling of the popular psychiatric themes, the real affinities of Dr. Tillich are with nineteenth century German idealism rather than with the thought of this century.

We may perhaps describe the basic philosophy of Dr. Tillich as a kind of rationalistic existentialism. It is rationalistic in the sense that it attempts a rational interpretation even of man's many irrationalities. It is thus quite distinct from the thought of those contemporary existentialists who seem to want not only to accept the fact of the irrational in man but even to suppose that we must be irrational about it if we would interpret it properly. Certainly Dr. Tillich is neither Kantian nor Hegelian. Rather his affinities are with the smaller figures who intervene between the two great giants, with people like Fichte and Schelling. Looking farther back through the history of Christian thought, Tillich reminds us not so much of giants like Aquinas as of a great and solitary figure like the ninth century Scotus Eriugena who bequeathed to us a beautifully systematic Neo-Platonic Christianity.

From the point of view of the Christian theo-

logian in the more ordinary sense of the word, the merits of this striking series of volumes—and indeed of most of Dr. Tillich's writings—are almost purely philosophical and not theological at all. Every now and then words like God and Christ are identified with various Tillichian philosophical concepts, but it would be idle to pretend that the formation of these concepts has been influenced at all by any serious acceptance of the biblical course of events as a revelation from God.

Revelation really means evidence, and the claim that a revelation has occurred really amounts to a belief that there exists in human history a vein or source which provides us with what can only be described as empirical evidence pointing in the direction of a certain type of metaphysical conclusion. In Dr. Tillich's work there is little or no sign that he has ever thought in this theological way. The conceptual philosophical scheme seems to come first and the Christian Paul Tillich insists on correlating it with the evidence subsequently, but even after the correlation has taken place the philosophical system remains a philosophical system, and the case for it would be just as strong, or as weak, even if there were no correlation with the Christian scheme at all. For this reason most theologians will probably feel that however well Dr. Tillich may have succeeded in giving us a twentieth century version of a nineteenth century German idealism, he has not really composed a systematic Christian theology at all or an unsystematic one for that matter.

Indeed, far from relying upon the evangelical testimony to the Saving Events, the general tendency of Tillich's thought is to release us from any such necessity. The biblical narrative supplies him with symbols which can be used to symbolize the truth of the Tillichian philosophy, but not with reasons for embracing the Tillichian philosophy.

Perhaps the chief difficulty for this reviewer is that for philosophical reasons he cannot bring himself to accept the Tillichian philosophy or indeed any other version of nineteenth century German idealism. Those who cannot accept Tillich's systematic theology as good philosophy will surely not be tempted to accept it as systematic theology. It is more like a gnostic scheme in which there is no real acceptance of any redeeming and emancipating act of God that makes us free and gives us life, but which nevertheless tries to

assimilate the Christian testimony by transforming the alleged events into symbols of philosophical truth. Dr. Tillich, in other words, treats the New Testament rather as Philo treated the Old Testament, as a series of myths which properly interpreted mean or represent the conceptual truth understood in a philosophical tradition quite alien to Holy Scripture. For good or for ill, it must be said that real theologians never work in this way. They are concerned with the interpretation of the empirical, that is historical, data without resort to which they could not conceivably arrive at the conclusions, to which they do arrive.

This still leaves us with the question with which we began: How timely is Tillich? Without doubt, many people suppose that he is the great theologian of this age, but it is still permissible to suggest that such people may be mistaken. On the contrary, it would seem to the present reviewer (a) that he is not really a theologian at all, and that (b) his true age is the nineteenth century, not the twentieth. These may seem to be rather damning criticisms of a work that entitles itself *Systematic Theology*, and is taken by many of its admirers to be above all a tract for our own times. If the criticisms are well founded it must be confessed that they are indeed damning. Yet the present reviewer would think it ungracious and unjust not to conclude by saluting these three volumes as a very great human achievement. A systematic metaphysics is as much a work of art as a work of science, perhaps even more so. It is possible, for example, to believe that Hegel was almost entirely wrong about almost everything and yet to acknowledge his masterly skill in the handling of concepts. The Hegelian system may be wrong, but it is certainly beautiful. In the same way, the Tillichian system may also be wrong in almost every detail; yet it must be saluted as one of the most consummate essays in philosophy on the grand scale that our age, which on the whole has been rather poor in such forms of rational beauty, has either witnessed or is likely to witness. The *Systematic Theology* is undoubtedly a lovely system. The reviewer may be permitted to doubt whether it is valid, but there is no question but that it has been constructed with superb skill by a great philosophical artist.

Reviewed by J. V. LANGMEAD CASSERLY