



## On Paul Tillich at Harvard

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Citation	Holton, Gerald. 2012. On Paul Tillich at Harvard. Paul Tillich Lecture: A 50th Anniversary Symposium, "Paul Tillich at Harvard: First and Future Generations", May 1, 2012.
Citable link	<a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:29995310">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:29995310</a>
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# ON PAUL TILLICH AT HARVARD

Gerald Holton

May 1, 2012

How lucky were we who knew and learned from Paul Tillich while he was at Harvard for seven years, from 1955.

I shall, by request, touch on three topics:

- his interactions while he lived here,
- my interaction with him,
- and Tillich's conception of Science, as I found it.

As to the first point, he called his stay here the "greatest period" of his life, the "fulfillment".

Let me suggest how much we gained from his presence. While magisterial, he was easily accessible, often just fun, and eager for companionship. This began at the first dinner, given in his honor in 1955 by President Pusey. Present. There were colleagues from a great variety of fields. He said to us: "I have been looking forward to being among you. For so many years I have been mostly among theologians." Then heaving a big breath, as if freed from some confinement, he added with a big smile: "I would love to learn from you."

At the end, I plan to tell one of the things which that learned man learned while here.

Through his lectures, writings, and talks we came to know each other, but also through the enormous *Gastfreundlichkeit* of Paulus and Hannah. Nina and I were often taken by them to the Windowshop restaurant, and they came to our house. He had enormous appetite for personal and intellectual companionship, young and old, students, American-born Faculty and fellow émigrés.

This brings me to a very important point. For it can be well said that Harvard had prepared itself for Paulus to flourish here, and did so in two ways, first through the original undergraduate General Education program, then at its height.

GenEd had come about through an epiphany. President Conant told me that while he was in Washington during WWII to oversee war-time scientific research, he found that politicians and generals knew how to fight the war, but not why. To his mind, the war was to preserve Western Civilization and Democracy from the barbarians.

Therefore, in 1943, he appointed a committee at Harvard College to propose a curriculum that would give future leaders the necessary education in this regard. That resulted in the 1945 manifesto, significantly titled "General Education in a Free Society." This launched many courses here on the best and most enduring legacy of our culture. The program had also a

moral dimension: to help develop citizens who knew what was good, to be good, to do good.

For many years, this grandiose experiment succeeded, although there were of course some professors who were reluctant to study up on the classics of their field. Paulus gave enthusiastically some of these courses, perhaps most famously the one titled "Religion, Art and Science", a theme from his early book "System der Wissenschaften". He had it in his bones, in content and moral purpose. One might say he embodied Western Civilization.

So by initiating GenEd long before his arrival, Harvard had prepared the ground for Paulus to act at his best while at the College. But there had occurred also another, second preparation for his act and pleasure in his many years here. Something important and unique had happened at Harvard and other universities nearby, beginning some decades before Paulus and Hannah arrived, and mostly overlapped with them here.

I refer of course to the somber but large influx to BU, Brandeis, Tufts, MIT, Harvard and elsewhere here of the intellectual migration from Europe, much of it owing to the rise of fascism there. These new arrivals complemented and enriched the great native talent already in place. But also in a natural way they changed the milieu and the cultural/social ground here.

Most of them, whether immigrants, exiles or refugees, had had similar, humanistic education, based on the classics, starting in their Gymnasia and Lycees as part of their *Bildung*, and came with a record of professional accomplishments from abroad. Thus it is highly ironic that they, having grown up in the teachings of Western Civilization, came here even as President Conant tried hard to persuade our innocent students and some rebellious faculty to make such knowledge the center of his GenEd courses.

Not by intent, this first wave of ex-Europeans -- let me call it the Tillich Generation -- subtly but significantly changed the local atmosphere and the prevailing worldview, and many are remembered to have profoundly improved their academic departments or other professions. There are fine books, such as B. Bailyn and D. Fleming, "The Intellectual Migration" (1969), on their effect in all of the USA. Yet so far this has not been sufficiently studied for the Greater Boston area. It is a Research Site, waiting to be explored.

Paulus is to my mind the very Symbol of this phenomenon. With many émigrés who were here during the Tillich years, from many different fields, Paulus and Hannah formed cultural and social bonds. Prominent among them were Erik Erikson; Robert Ulich (formerly Minister of Education in Saxony); Victor Weisskopf (the MIT physicist who later gave one of the early Tillich Lectures); Naum Glatzer, the great Jewish theologian, then at Brandeis, who in fact had been Tillich's student in Frankfurt when he got his doctorate there in 1931; and Werner Jaeger, whom Paulus had admired when still in Germany, but who met only here.

At this point I must ask your indulgence, for a precious minute. I feel it is right that we, in this consecrated place, the Memorial Church, recall some of those professionals from abroad, the first wave, the Tillich Generation who came here, from the dark 1930s up to Tillich's departure from Harvard. He greatly valued many of them, knowing well that hundreds and

hundreds more of their kind had horrible fates.

Here is an incomplete list of those who were lucky to find life and work in this area. (I knew many of them.)

Rudolph Arnheim, Konrad Bloch, Grete and Edward Bibring,

Marcel Breuer, Leon Brillouin, former Chancellor of Germany

Heinrich Bruening, Karl Deutsch, Helene and Felix Deutsch,

Giorgio DeSantillana, Otto Ehrentheil, Erik Erikson, Otto Eckstein,

Carl Friedrich, Philipp Frank, Walter Gropius, Jorge Guillen, Sigfried Giedion,

Alexander Gerschenkron, Nahum Glatzer, Aaron Gurewitch,

Hilda Geiringer, Gottfried Haberler, Albert Hirschman, Werner Jaeger, Lucy Jessner,

Roman Jakobson, Herbert Jehle, Mikhail Karpovich, Hans Kelsen, Gyorgy and Juliet Kepes,

George Kistiakowsky, Simon Kuznets, Wassily Leontief, Philip LeCorbeiller,

Erich Leinsdorf, Ernst Mayr, Richard von Mises, Jean Mayer,

Herbert Marcuse, Wilhelm von Moltke, Otto Oldenberg,

Renato Poggioli, Tolla Rank, I.A.Richards,

Jakob Rosenberg, Paul Rosenstein-Rodan, Walter Rosenblith,

Dirk Struik, Bruno Rossi, Krister Stendahl, Josep Lluís Sert,

Joseph Schumpeter, George Sarton, Gaetano Salvemini,

Raphael Salem, Paul Tillich, Lazlo Tisza, Robert Ulich,

Harry Wolfson, Victor Weintraub, and Viki Weisskopf.

A grand constellation!

I must now turn very briefly to the second segment of my talk. It is about my own interaction with Paulus. We became friends, even occasionally collaborators. We shared platforms, invited to speak on Religion and Science.

In 1957, I decided to start a quarterly journal, Daedalus, as a hobby. Each issue was to be on a topic that should be of deep interest to intelligent readers. Even before its first number, the issue on Science and the Modern World View, I persuaded Paulus to join the Editorial Board, to be on it with Raymon Aron, Etienne Gilson, P. W. Bridgman and others of that caliber.

My third issue, Summer 1958, was on Symbolism in Religion and Literature. Paulus allowed me to print as the lead article his essay "The Religious Symbol", as originally published in 1940.

This brings me directly to my third and final section today, Tillich and Science. For in this, his first article in Daedalus, Paulus first dealt with the Symbol in Theology, by Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Cassirer and others. Then he turned to the symbol in Science, with the paragraph beginning as follows:

"The objects of mythical intuition are at the same time the objects of scientific investigation. With the appearance of science they enter as such into a new dialectic...For the purpose of constructing this 'world' of things, science needs concepts that are transcendent to reality. Thus concepts like evolution have mythical power."

Therefore, he continued, "it is possible for the ultimate presuppositions of science to be classed with the highest concepts of abstract monotheism". Thus originates what he wrote to be "the religious power" of science. Here he was tantalizingly close to what many scientists believed, from Kepler, Galileo, Newton, the *Naturphilosophen*, and even Einstein. But Paulus was of course here chiefly pursuing his old program of reimagining each field, from mathematics through literature, in terms of the religious viewpoint.

But there emanates a quite different view about science, from his Terry Lectures, published in 1952, a few years before he came to us. In that book, titled "The Courage to Be", he dealt with science very briefly, and mainly negatively. Thus Copernicus and Galileo are mentioned there only because of their implicit support of a universe that is infinite. Hence, Paulus continued, comes the human's situation of NonBeing in a universe without limits. That in turns accounts for our state of "deep anxiety" and "loss of humanly understanding of meaning".

There is more of this kind, especially in the important second chapter, entitled significantly "Being, Nothingness, and Anxiety". In fact the book as a whole may be regarded as a way to overcome the nihilisms and anxieties through renewed Courage to Be. It also shows us Tillich's ever-present preoccupation with the dialectic of *Sein und Nichtsein*, of which the English equivalent words are mere ghosts.

Tillich explicitly wrote in his book: "Hegel's dialectic makes negation the dynamic power in nature and history". The book ends with a masterful demonstration of Paulus's dialectic. The final sentence, printed in italics, is: "*The courage to be is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt*". But the reader will remember that a main source of the anxiety of doubt was said to stem from science.

I will finish with a speculation about Tillich's struggle with Science. During his life, his vision on this subject went through a cycle with three phases. When still young in Europe, in his book "*System der Wissenschaften*" (1923, at age about 37), a true *Gesamtkunstwerk*, he saw science on the whole as a respected part of *Kultur*, as was quite usual there.

But by the time of the Terry Lectures and its book version of 1952, he had entered a second phase. He had adopted the questioning of science and technology analogous to that of his fellow Existentialists, such as Heidegger and Sartre, whom he mentioned in his book. In the "Dynamics of Faith", Tillich still wrote sternly: "The dimension of faith is not the dimension of science".

Yet, something happened from 1955 on, when he was at Harvard, after having spent most of his life until then with theologians, as he said so wistfully at our very first meeting. He was now for many years in fervent contact with many of the great minds at the various institutions in the Greater Boston area, including some of the distinguished ex-Europeans, professionals from all the various fields. And this now included also, at last, real scientists, such as George Wald, Edwin Kemble, Viktor Weisskopf, and others of that distinction.

From those, Paulus did just what he told us at the first meeting, namely to learn from them, as indeed he taught them in return.

As a bit of evidence of his renewed understanding about science, I will end by quoting from a remarkable lecture which Tillich gave to the Board of Overseers at Harvard in 1959, on "Religion in the Intellectual Life of the University".

He said in passing that "University education" should of course include "strict scientific discipline". But he also said this:

"Ultimate questions appear in different disciplines. In physics, for example, both the limits of our world and the greatness of its structure, the integrating and disintegrating, the creative and the destructive forces in their interplay, are problems which point to ultimate questions. And there are great physicists who do not want to remain silent about them".

Tillich did not name them, and did not have to.

So by the time I, at an early stage of my career, had the privilege of coming to know Paul Tillich, his existential anxiety on the subject of science and religion, as presented in his middle phase, had given way, and he was turning back to his initial view, if not of harmony, but of the fruitful tension between those two interlinked dimensions.

Paulus, we thank you for all you learned and taught.