Paul Tillich, Albert Einstein, and the Quest for the Ultimate

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Paul Tillich, Albert Einstein, and the Quest for the Ultimate

Gerald Holton

(The Paul Tillich Lecture, April 12, 2004, Harvard University)

My aim, in this brief hour, is to share with you a glimpse I was privileged to get of the landscape of two great minds, Tillich and Einstein. In different but parallel ways, they both reached out to the limits of human understanding, driven by what Tillich called Ultimate Concerns. Their ambitions were so enormous that, in the end, neither had fully succeeded. Yet, each left us an invaluable legacy, and perhaps also a lesson for the great challenges of today, so poorly attended to.

These two men had much in common, and might therefore have become close comrades. But because they looked at the world from different perspectives, they came eventually into conflict.

That is a rough sketch of the architecture of my lecture. But this being formally a Tillich Lecture, let me reassure you right away that my credentials for giving it do not rest on any claim that I am an intimate student of Tillich’s theology, or that I have come to clarify some puzzles in his writings. Others here, including Mr. William Crout, who has kindly shared with me his recollections and sources, are much more familiar with Tillich’s work, with his vast Archive in the Theological Library at our Divinity School, with his official Collected Works in fourteen volumes, in addition to his many other books, and the more than 1200 entries in the catalog of the Harvard Libraries that refer to works by or about him.
What I can claim is that I enjoyed Tillich’s generous intellectual company during the nearly seven years while we were faculty colleagues at Harvard. We had many discussions, and appeared together at invited presentations on science and religion. Hannah and Paulus were frequent guests in Nina’s and my house, and we in theirs. He accepted my invitation to be a consulting editor of the journal Daedalus, and in its first volume, for the year 1958, he let me publish his essay entitled “The Religious Symbol”.

At this point I think I am expected to tell you how I first met Tillich. It was a revealing meeting. In my case this encounter, in 1955, had been prepared by Harvard’s president, Nathan Pusey. Mr. Pusey had the good habit of inviting, to a fine dinner, a dozen or more of his professors, those of us who were giving the various, large introductory courses in the General Education program of those years. On each of those occasions, some topic of general interest to this group’s common task was discussed, in a spirit of gentle amity.

But one evening, this amity came to an abrupt end. One of the professors there remarked in passing that he doubted the Divinity School might have anything valuable to contribute to the College’s program. Mr. Pusey became visibly upset. Since his arrival as president about two years before, the Divinity School had been one of his main preoccupations. “Just wait,” he said. “At one of our next meetings you will see an outstanding theologian, who has been attracted to our Divinity School.”

Not long after, the new star joined us. It was Paul Tillich. Even during the casual dinner conversation before his talk, one sensed his special quality, his membership in the great European tradition of culture, his familiarity with high-level intellectual
controversies, and also his liveliness at age 69. As his student and assistant, Paul Lee, said later, Paul Tillich was, “as a scholar, a one-man theological symphony,” yet also, unlike some other academics, “passionate, full of desire, vibrant with vitality.” Indeed, one was immediately drawn to him. [2.5 min. videotape of Tillich interview]

Tillich had just come to Harvard from the Union Theological Seminary in New York, where he had found refuge after being forced to leave Germany, dismissed there from his professorship at the University of Frankfurt in 1933, in the first weeks of the Nazi regime. He had been one of its outspoken opponents.

In 1951 he had published the first volume of his master work, Systematic Theology, and was working on the other two volumes, issued in 1958 and 1963. He had just given lectures at the University of Virginia on “Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality”. There he had said: “The God who is a Being is transcended by the God who is Being itself, the ground and abyss of every Being. And the God who is a person is transcended by the God who is the Person-Itself, the ground and abyss of every person. … Against Pascal I say: ‘The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the God of the philosophers is the same God. He is a person, and the negation of himself as a person.”

I have selected these passages for two reasons: to prepare us for the conflict over the concept of the Personal God, which will become important later in this account, and to alert you to the dialectical style in Tillich’s thinking, a style which James Luther Adams, arguably his most eminent commentator, called “a philosophy of paradox”.

To return to the dinner: When Tillich’s presentation began, he turned to us with a question: Would we like him to outline two of his central ideas, which were, as he put it,
“God is the infinite ground of Being,” and “Mankind’s highest duty is to focus on Ultimate Concerns”? There was a long, awkward silence.

What might have troubled my colleagues in their silence? Surely, no problem with the word “God.” It was the first thing you expected to hear from a theologian. And in any case, even the scientists there knew that some of their kind had been practically on first-name terms with God. A famous example was the great experimental physicist, I. I. Rabi. He wrote once, “[Physics] filled me with awe, put me in touch with the sense of original causes, brought me closer to God….Whenever one of my students came to me with a scientific project, I asked only one question: ‘Will it bring you nearer to God’?”

For his part, Einstein had said memorably: “What really interests me is whether God had any choice in the creation of the world.” And to this day, Stephen Hawking, among others, is implicating the deity in his research findings.

So, if the assembly was not puzzling over the word “God,” perhaps it might be pondering over the word “Being,” in the phrase “God is the infinite ground of Being.” That word in English is such a pale reflection of the complex and historically fought-over concept, Sein, or Seiendes, concepts Tillich had been using since his earliest days in Germany, not only because there he had to study books like Hegel’s Die Lehre von Sein, and also for a time had been a faculty colleague of Martin Heidegger (in Marburg).

Or perhaps Tillich’s audience was trying to adjust mentally to the phrase “ultimate concerns,” one of his favorite terms [“ultimate” in his German was “das Unendliche, das Unbedingte”]. But each of us there should have thought immediately of victors and victims in pursuit of ultimate concerns, their grand challenges. Among
scientists, history records that many of the best were driven to depression and even suicide. And of course, history, literature, song and myth are full of those ecstatic or inconsolable seekers of the ultimate, all those desperate lovers, for whom the words “yes” or “no” are the “whole world” [think of young Werther, or Schubert’s Wanderer], or those explorers at the extremes, or the worlds great prophets, their ascetic religious devotees, or the many others in the grip of some all-consuming goal -- and not least, to turn to the demonic side on which Tillich also wrote much, think of the vast number of humans on our unhappy globe, for whom the quest for the ultimate has spiraled down to the frantic search for survival for another day.

Howard Nemorov, in his article “The Quester Legend,” traced the lives of the luckier ones, the heroes in the Holy Grail romances, calling them “the seekers, the questers, who range heaven and hell … [The Quester] is forever searching for the grail—that is to say, the Highest: knowledge, wisdom, consecration….”

Well, when the awkward silence at the table was broken at last, it turned out that the problem felt by some with Tillich’s topic was focused on another matter entirely: One of the puzzled scientists asked Tillich if he would care to define in what sense he was using the word “infinite.” Was it perhaps in the sense of the actual infinite of the great mathematician Georg Cantor, in his theory of transfinite sets? Or in the sense closer to other theorists, from Aristotle’s Potential Infinity to our day?

Many around the table must have felt embarrassed. But not Paul Tillich. A smile came over his face: “Dear Colleagues,” he said, “This is exactly why I have been looking forward so much to join you at Harvard. In my last position and in others before, I was
surrounded mostly by theologians; so I had no opportunity to learn from them what I can learn from you. I would love to do that now.” He had us in the palm of his hand.

Of course, a few of us there, including myself, gladly agreed to set up an informal workshop, meeting with Tillich several times, and learning from him and one another. To preview one thing we quickly learned from Tillich: He told us that he thought of the meaning of ultimates and especially of infinity by means of visual metaphors. Visualization and symbolism in art were important to him. He routinely included pictures in his lectures, in order to show, as he put it once, “the possibility of breaking the surface of reality in order to dig into its depth… and you cannot understand theology without understanding symbols.”

Such a symbolic use of an image, he said, would help us to understand how he perceived the “symbol” of infinity. Thus Tillich said that sitting at the edge of an ocean and gazing out, the view was for him a symbol of the infinite, hinting at an infinite depth before him, but also bordering on the finite, as he was positioned on the beach, the boundary between the two. Here I remembered Friedrich Schiller’s famous couplet, “Only fullness leads to clarity, and truth lies in the abyss” [Nur die Fuelle fuehrt zur Klarheit, und im Abgrund wohnt die Wahrheit].

Let us look now more closely at some of Tillich’s key ideas and how they originated, and then compare these with Einstein’s own main motivating concept. For this purpose it would of course be interesting to know whether and when our two protagonists actually met. They might very well have done so early, in Berlin. Einstein was in Berlin from 1914 until 1932. Tillich came there in 1919, a time of great chaos, and
until 1924 was Privatdozent at the University. He lectured on “A Theory of Culture”, on a vast range of fields—politics, art, philosophy, psychology, and sociology—a grand, multidimensional mission, and specifically in the service of relating religion to the rest of culture and—being both pastor and social democrat—to real life.

While in a way they were colleagues, whether Einstein and Tillich actually met in person then in Germany remains a rumor. However, they can be said to have met there in another way important to our story, namely by sharing much of the then current worldview and cultural background, as well as being, each of them, possessed by essentially the same ultimate goal, as we shall see shortly.

Because our own cultural barometer has, during the past decades, swung from unity to diversity, we may be puzzled how the passion for generalization, for synthesis, came to each of our two protagonists. But Einstein, Tillich, and intellectuals of their generation, born in the late decades of the 19th century, were exposed, in their schooling, reading, discussions, to similar forces during their cultural formation. In their impressionable years they would each have read the standard classical authors, and above all one figure of whom both Einstein and Tillich frequently wrote and quoted in their correspondence: Immanuel Kant.

One of the lessons many of Kant’s 19th century followers had taken from his Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science was that two opposing forces determined all natural phenomena, but that this polarity only masked a “hidden [versteckte] identity.” That had allowed Kant to hypothesize the existence of a “Grundkraft,” one fundamental force of which all other forces are variants. It is of course a thematic line that goes back
to antiquity, to Thales the Ionian, who looked for one substance or essence to explain all phenomena of the material world. A version of the old Ionian Enchantment possessed Kant, who put Unity first among his Categories.

To those who regarded themselves as his pupils, Immanuel Kant provided the well-springs from which issued two main directions of thought. One is exemplified in the scientific work of major 19th-century scientists such as Hermann von Helmholtz, Emil du Bois-Reymond, and Rudolf Virchow. On the other side, Kant could be read, or misread, as the father of a very different view of science, one infused with the Romanticism of the “Nature Philosophers.” They included Friedrich Schelling; the brothers Schlegel; Novalis; and all their influential followers.

The Danish Naturphilosoph Hans Christian Oersted had even proved experimentally in 1820 that the existence of a fundamental force was plausible. For Oersted showed that an electric current produces around itself a magnetic field. That was the first part of a synthesis of different fields, expanded by Maxwell in the 1870s to include light, by Hertz to verify for radio waves, and finally by Einstein, to include all of these, and more. Parallel unifications were developed by others, such as the Law of Conservation of Energy applicable to all sciences. The password for the sciences at the time was “Holism.” And outside the sciences, the nostalgia for Gesamtkunstwerke was also pursued.

As to Tillich, in his essay entitled “Autobiographical reflections”, he told how he became infected with the synthesizing passion. It is as remarkable story. He passed his earliest years in small towns in East Germany, built around the Gothic church, all within
the medieval town walls. His father was an authoritarian Lutheran minister and his mother, as he wrote, was also morally rigid. Young Tillich found refuge in what he called a “romantic”, “aesthetic meditative attitude toward nature”, reinforced by the “deeply moving” nature mysticism in beloved German poetry—Goethe, Hoelderlin, Novalis, Nietzsche, George, Rilke. Such readings led him to a vision, as he put it, of the presence of the infinite in the finite, which he regarded as also theologically affirmed.

Eventually it came to confrontations with his stern father, the “angry” supporter of “the conservative point of view”. Tillich rebelled against it both philosophically and politically, eventually becoming a prominent supporter of Germany’s Religious Socialism. Here Tillich added,” The two strong motives I received”, were “the romantic and the revolutionary. The balance of these two motivations has remained the basic problem of my thought and of my life ever since”.

In his Gymnasium years, he adored ancient Greek and Greek culture, especially the pre-Socratic philosophers, Heraclitus and Parmenides, of whom he wrote later (The Future of Religion, 1966) nothing in all of philosophy written since then has surpassed them.

At that point in his autobiography, Tillich suddenly writes: “The way to synthesis was my own way. It followed the classical German philosophers from Kant to Hegel, and remained a driving force all my theological work”. On his own, starting when still in high school, young Tillich studied works of Kant, Fichte, Schleiermacher, Hegel and Schelling. When he came to do his doctoral dissertation, it was on Schelling’s philosophy of religion. Later he turned to the period when Schelling broke with Hegel’s “system of reconciliation” and pointed toward existentialism.
That turn, Tillich told elsewhere, was furthered by two factors. One, surprisingly, was that, when still in his teens, Tillich came upon a book he regarded as the most important of all: Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, in August Wilhelm von Schlegel’s translation. He learned the whole play by heart, and was completely taken with its central existential question of the meaning of life, which Hamlet summarized of course in his phrase, “To Be or Not To Be”, or rather, in Schlegel’s words, “Sein oder Nichtsein, das ist hier die Frage”. It may not be an accident that in the first volume of Tillich’s Systematic Theology there is a chapter headed “Sein und Nichtsein”.

The second factor was an event that, Tillich said in an interview, was for him a crucial life-changing experience. During the whole First World War, Tillich was a chaplain with the troops, often at the front. One night, in a terrible battle, he saw all around him his friends and comrades die miserably of their wounds. He said about this. “My eyes were opened forever to the negative side of life. My philosophical thinking went from idealism to existentialism…. [I now saw] the human predicament, with its despair, guilt, anxiety, emptiness, meaninglessness, death, as seen by modern novelists and artists.” “My world and idealist philosophy collapsed.” His reading now included Marx and Freud. And he realized that his work was drawing on “competitive motives of thought”, on both his earlier and his later sensibilities, resulting in “a certain inconsistency and indefiniteness of terminology.”

During his years in Berlin, Tillich published in 1923, at age 37, his first large book, *Das System der Wissenschaften, nach Gegenstaenden und Methoden* (The System of the Sciences according to Objects and Methods), with the accent strongly on the “Das”. Not only was it a step to his later, second system, that of theology. We can see
here already Tillich in the firm grip of a synthesis on behalf of a great mission. Intending to encompass all knowledge under three headings—Denken, Sein and Geist -- Tillich deals here essentially with the systematization of all cognitive disciplines, as he had been doing in his lectures. Therefore the book deals with logic, mathematics, phenomenology, the empirical sciences from physics to geology and the life sciences, on to psychology, sociology, history, art, law, metaphysics, ethics, philosophy, and of course theology. A main purpose of the book was to find the place for theology, and to show that every field can have a theological component.

In his introduction to the book, Tillich explained that he saw it as his duty to provide “an overview of the whole of knowledge”, and also to put it in the service of necessary social change. No wonder some of his colleagues lashed out at him.

As we are about to turn now to Einstein’s analogous passions, we come upon a happy surprise. I said earlier that we have no sure evidence that Einstein and Tillich met personally in Berlin. But there happily exists at least one documentable joint appearance of those two at another place, a meeting that had important and unexpected consequences for each of them. There exists a photograph in the Tillich Archive at our Divinity School library. It shows both of these men at a pleasant gathering of about two dozen persons. Among them is Tillich at age 41, and Einstein who just had entered his 50th year. [PHOTO]

The place is Davos in Switzerland, and the time is Sunday, the 18th of March 1928. This is a group of well recognized intellectuals from many fields of study. They had come from Germany, France, Austria and Switzerland, during the spring break at their
universities. It is still a year before the start of the Great Depression, a time when one could still hope for a civilized century.

That town was still small, not yet today’s fashionable sports and congress center for the Masters of the Universe. This group had gone there on a humanitarian mission. Davos was then, as it had been for decades, the site for many sanatoria, for patients suffering from pulmonary tuberculosis. Those patients lingered there in the belief that they would be cured by the good mountain air and the sunlight, at this altitude of 5000 feet. The place had already gained extra attention since the publication, four years earlier, by the book, *The Magic Mountain*, by Thomas Mann (later to become another refugee of the class of 1933). In short, we are looking at the Zauberberg, to which came Hans Kastorp and his doomed cousin, Joachim Zimmens, two typical young students whose general isolation in the sanatoria, far from the outside world of action and ideas, only worsened their condition.

That general fate of the patients was precisely why this group of prominent academics had come there in 1928. They were starting a month-long Alpine University. Their unselfish mission was to give lectures and hold discussions, hoping thereby to enlighten and cheer up those young people from the sanatoria. The lectures, in German and French, were on science, philosophy, literature, jurisprudence, and sociology: six or seven of these every day, six days a week, from forty-five lecturers when all had arrived, including people like Lucien Levy-Bruhl and Jean Piaget. The audience consisted of some 360 students and 400 others from the environs, all crowding into the Grand Hotel Curhaus.
Einstein gave the inaugural lecture, on “The Fundamental Concepts of Physics in its Development,” and he remained fully engaged during the time of his stay—perhaps too much so. He attended other professors’ lectures assiduously, met with individuals and small groups, even played his violin at a chamber concert, to help raise funds for this new university. Tillich gave two lectures, one on “Religion and Culture,” and the other on “The Religious Knowledge”.

Little did Tillich and Einstein know that this meeting would, for each of them, be a turning point in his life. Tillich had come from his professorship, now at the University of Dresden. He had by now published about a dozen books and many articles, ranging from Schelling and Schleiermacher to religious socialism. This last was to be understood as socialism studied from a religious point of view, and intended to lead to activities improving the social situation, unlike other prominent Protestants such as Karl Barth, who, Tillich complained, “virtually ignored the social situation.” Einstein, on his side, was now at the height of his fame, chiefly thanks to his general relativity theory; but, like Tillich, he too was always ready to throw himself into the social problems of the day, often to the dismay and disapproval of his nearer colleagues.

At Davos, Tillich was in high demand, surrounded by students and colleagues. His former teacher, Fritz Medicus, saw and heard him, and wrote that Tillich was clearly “the coming man in philosophy. One of Tillich’s talks at Davos was scheduled to follow upon one by a speaker who had given the rather pessimistic prediction that civilization was declining on an exhausted soil in Europe. Upon that, Tillich rose and objected. The religious person, he held, is used to finding himself in a crisis. That may even help him
to avoid false certainties, and lead him to turn to the necessary and reliable certainty in God.

In the audience were two psychologists from the University of Frankfurt. They decided right then and there to propose that Tillich be called to the University of Frankfurt—and that in fact happened the next year, to Tillich’s joy. Frankfurt was then a great place for a theologian, since it was the home also for the outstanding Jewish theologians, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and their brilliant student, Nahum Glatzer.

In terms of intellectual production and influence, Tillich’s years at Frankfurt were to be arguably his best so far. As Adams remarked about Tillich’s works during those days, “We see here the fundamental impulses that pervaded Tillich’s whole career. He wished to make the prophetic and sacramental, the theological and the philosophical relations relevant to the present historical situation, and he did this by means of a constant dialogue with the creative and critical figures of past and present.”

In short, when Tillich left Davos and went on to his post in Frankfurt, he could consider that his kindness to the Davos students well rewarded.

As to Einstein, his vigorous participation in Davos had also long-term consequences, but of a very different kind. His biographer and son-in-law Rudolf Kaiser wrote later, that Einstein had been persuaded to come to Davos because of his concern for those sick students, lying there without intellectual challenges. But Einstein himself did not feel physically well in the beginning of that year. As Rudolf Kaiser revealed, “In Davos started [Einstein’s] severe heart disease, which kept him chained to his bed for a long time.” It was a debility that he had to suffer from later on.
I have said nothing yet about the inaugural lecture Einstein gave at Davos. The body of the lecture was essentially a deep bow to Schopenhauer’s determinism, which Einstein had accepted from first to last. Einstein in that year was preoccupied by the current debate about the role of causality, a debate caused by the rise of the so-called Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics, of Bohr, Heisenberg, Born, etc. The remarkable success of their new physics was based on their thematic belief that natural phenomena at the atomic scale were not classically causal but indeterminate, probabilistic. Einstein then, and for the rest of his life, was certain that he could rely on what he called in that Davos lecture “my scientific instinct,” namely, that the new quantum mechanics was a temporary phase, that ultimately, one would interpret “events as necessary and fully under the law of causality,” a program which he noted to have been “divined by the great materialists of Greek antiquity.” Indeed, his own theory of relativity was, he said, “nothing more than a further consequential development of the [older] field theory,” based on causality.

So far, so good. Einstein too had been a builder of a system, now to be defended against the swarm of probabilists. And if Einstein had not said anything else in that lecture, which Tillich surely attended, all might have been well between them. But in his lecture, Einstein had another paragraph. In fact, he had started the whole talk with one of his persistent opinions, namely that the scientific triumphs throughout history, based on strict causality, showed the uselessness of seeking “to refer all that happens to the exercise of will on the part of invisible spirits.” Moreover, he characterized that belief as worthy only of “primitive man.”
We can only speculate what Tillich thought about this, perhaps an early version of a paragraph in his later book, *Dynamics of Faith*: “Scientific truth and the truth of faith do not belong to the same dimension of meaning. Science has no right and no power to interfere with faith, and faith has no power to interfere with science. One dimension of meaning is not able to interfere with another dimension”.

Let us now take a few minutes to look more closely at Einstein, in preparation for the coming conflict with Tillich.

Einstein’s urgent mental and metaphysical compunction, his own ultimate concern, were hinted at in an article of 1916, where Einstein had written: “What goal will and can be reached by the science to which I am dedicating myself?” And he answered: “To dedicate oneself to what is essential, as against what is based only on the accident of development.” Under this self-demand, he had turned to extending his original theory of relativity of 1905 into his general theory, or rather, as he significantly called it at first in print, to his “generalized” theory of relativity.

I have written about the great significance to Einstein of this term, “generalized.” Here I need only summarize by noting that in his publications, and especially in his letters from 1899 on, Einstein spoke again and again of what he confessed to be the strongest moving force in his intellectual life. “I am driven by my need to generalize,” he wrote to his friend W. De Sitter. His relativity theory of 1905, stunning though it was, and is to this day, was unsatisfactory for Einstein himself, because it did not apply to accelerated frameworks and gravitation. Therefore, working himself for many years to near physical breakdown in order to generalize the special relativity theory, he produced by 1916 what has ever since been widely acknowledged to be an almost superhuman
accomplishment, the General Theory. Now Einstein was able to apply the theory to the whole cosmos. One section of his popular book of 1917 on the theory had the heading “Consideration about the World as a Whole.” Nothing less. In an article of the same year, applying his theory to cosmology, he found that the theory allowed him to calculate the density and size of the universe itself. Upon the success of the experimental test of the theory in 1919, one could almost feel that with his theory Einstein could answer the key question, “what holds the world together in its innermost,” the challenge that had obsessed Goethe’s Faust. Compared to what Einstein had done, most problems of other scientists, their other concerns, seemed to sink into relative insignificance.

Einstein was confident of his success even before the 1919 test of his theory. He had declared, in a widely read speech in 1918 that the supreme task, the highest duty, of physicists is to seek the most universal elementary laws from which, by pure deduction, the whole world picture can be achieved. And he confessed there that “the longing to behold this pre-established harmony, requiring inexhaustible patience and perseverance, can only come from a ‘state of feeling’ akin to that of a religious worshipper or one who is in love.”

On this, Tillich would have agreed. On the final page of his book of 1923 he had called the pursuit of the Wissenschaften to be a spiritual act. He repeatedly used the trio of Eros, passion, and scientific sobriety to describe the necessary mindset for reaching toward the ultimate. Indeed, to Tillich, the pursuit of such exalted aims was what he called the “religious element in the whole intellectual enterprise,” and he defined religion as “the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern.” Einstein, for his part, analogously
wrote that the perception in the universe of “profound reason and beauty constitute true religiosity.”

After the publication and successful test of the General Theory, scientists and much of the public made Einstein into a veritable icon of genius and of almost mystic revelation. So it was inevitable that, just as for Tillich’s early work, a backlash would not be far behind. I leave aside, in Einstein’s case, the vicious anti-Semitic attacks which in fact made him flee from Berlin in 1922 for a round-the-world trip. After Nazi gangs had assassinated his friend, Foreign Minister Walther Rathenau, Einstein’s own name was found on their list, to be the next one to be killed for his so-called Jewish physics and his social views.

Among those who objected to Einstein’s work, though less violently, were also conservative theologians, who thought Einstein had brashly invaded their territory. To them, the proper answer to the Faustian question what holds the world together was not to be found in Einstein’s bunch of tensor calculus equations, but in the presence and grace of God. Most famously, Boston’s Cardinal O’Connell charged that Einstein’s view of space and time is “a cloak beneath which lies the ghastly apparition of atheism.” The journal Commonweal published numerous articles and editorials against Einstein. It may have been such attacks that decided Einstein to write his remarkable series of essays on science and religion, beginning in 1930.

Another reason for the backlash against Einstein’s work was a semantic sort of time bomb, ticking away ever since his theory’s early form of 1905. I am speaking of the term relativity itself. Einstein in fact had not called his publication initially a relativity theory, and he did not use the term himself for years in the titles of his publications. He
adopted it eventually only after most scientists, starting with Max Planck in 1906, had freely used that term to refer to Einstein’s work. Einstein himself had thought his theory from the beginning to be not a revolutionary act, but merely, as he put it to his friend Habicht in 1905, a point of view “making use of a modification of the theory of space and time.” He saw his work as an act of simplification, of generalization, hence an aesthetically more pleasing way to think about physics.

He called it significantly his “Maxwellian Program.” And he complained in letters to friends that a correct term for his work would at best have been Invariantentheorie, a theory not of relativity at all, but of the opposite, of invariance, of constancy. After all, the whole point of his theory was that Einstein had found a way to rewrite the known laws of physics so as to make them for the first time independent of the relative points of vantage of different observers. Moreover, a key postulate in it was Einstein’s declaration of the absoluteness of the speed of light, regardless of the relative motion of the observer.

So it would have been not unreasonable for physicists to call Einstein’s work the theory of absolutes. Of course, as he later said in resignation, it was now too late to change the terminology. The semantic time bomb exploded in the 1920s, with collateral damage to this day. The very existence of the theory of relativity has been often and wrongly held to illustrate, and in extreme cases even to be responsible for, the perceived relativization of ethics and other common values.

Einstein’s long struggle with religion has been amply documented, starting with his remark on the very first page of his Autobiography that as a child, although “the son of entirely irreligious [Jewish] parents,” he came “to a deep religiosity up to the age of
twelve.” One may surmise that we have here a rebellion against his parental beliefs, ironically analogous to Tillich’s case.

While Einstein soon turned his back on any organized religion, the seeds of young religiosity in Einstein flourished greatly in his later years, partly under the influence of Spinoza’s Ethics, one of his favorite books. His religious views are thought even to have penetrated into choices he made in his physics. Up to about 1930, this part of his concerns kept a low profile. Then, between 1930 and 1948, he published several widely discussed articles on religion and science, with the first of these called simply “Religion and Science”, setting forth his idea that what he called “the cosmic religious feeling” is the most advanced and only acceptable stage of religion. Elaborating in these essays on his earlier remarks, such as his brief ones at Davos, Einstein explained that the concept of a Personal God was an anthropomorphic remnant of primitive times, of a religion of fear. It had to be abandoned in favor of a Spinozistic feeling of awe and “sense of ‘wonder’” at the rationality and beauty of the universe. Moreover, as one who believed in the “universal operation of the law of causation”, Einstein could not entertain “for a moment”, as he said, “the idea of a being who interferes in the course of events”—such as causing prayers to be answered, or miracles to occur. And Einstein concluded that “serious scientific workers are the only profoundly religious people.”

More ideas along this line were to come from his pen shortly. A key event in our story is Einstein’s essay entitled “Science and Religion.” It appeared as part of a remarkable symposium on the topic “Science, Philosophy and Religion in their Relation to the Democratic Way of Life”. That symposium, held in New York, was convoked by a stellar group of intellectuals from a wide range of fields. Both Einstein and Tillich signed
the call for the meeting. The main hope of this exercise was to arrive at some sort of unity among all their different fields of knowledge, in the service of preventing civilization from being undermined by unnecessary disputes, just when totalitarianism was sweeping over Europe. That Symposium volume is a fascinating document.

This is where Tillich re-enters in our story. For when Tillich read Einstein’s essay in that volume, he felt deeply troubled by it. Einstein had reemphasized his concept of cosmic religion. As he had put it there, a main source of the conflicts between the spheres of religion and of science lies in this concept of a personal God. Because Einstein believed that the law of causality applied to all physical events, it was inconceivable to him that a “Divine Will exists as an independent cause of natural events”. He called on all “teachers of religion” to “have the stature to give up the outdated doctrine of a Personal God, that is, give up that source of fear and hope which in the past placed such vast powers in the hands of priests.” He added that it was only the perception of the “grandeur of reason incarnate in existence” which “appears to be religious in the highest sense of the word.” In this way, science “purifies the religious impulse of the dross of its anthropomorphism,” and “contributes to a religious spiritualization of our understanding of life.” Strong words.

While Tillich was of course by no means of the conservative camp, he thought that some response was called for. Within two months of the publication of Einstein’s essay, Tillich issued his reply, entitled “Science and Theology: A Discussion with Einstein” [not “discussion” but Auseinandersetzung, to put apart, to separate, to dissolve a partnership, in the German of G.W.v.XII,p.300]. Precisely because that negative critique of the notion of a Personal God had been propagated by a man whom Tillich
regarded as the great transformer of our physical worldview, and to whom he had often referred in admiring terms, these remarks could not be left unchallenged. In his published reply, Tillich said rather sharply that Einstein had not understood the meaning of his own words. For when Einstein had written about that awe at the “grandeur of reason incarnate in existence,” Einstein had failed to notice that modern theology calls this “experience of the numinous” simply “the manifestation of the ground and abyss of being and meaning.” And in attacking the conception of the Personal God, Einstein was only railing against an old, out-of-date mixture of mythological and rational elements, even an unclean one. “No criticism of this distorted idea of God can be sharp enough.” Einstein had not noticed, Tillich added, that “God” is a symbol, that the predicate “personal” can be said of the Divine “only symbolically or by analogy, or if affirmed and negated at the same time.” And that symbol of God was needed for man’s existence: “For as the philosopher Schelling says: ‘Only a person can heal a person.’ This is the reason that the symbol of the Personal God is indispensable for living religion. It is a symbol, not an object”.

And there was more. Tillich’s suspicion now focused also on the concept of relativity itself. Traces of that suspicion in Tillich’s mind can be found years before the Davos meeting, for example in Tillich’s essay of 1924, entitled “The Tension of the Absolute versus the Relative in the Philosophy of History.” There, Tillich condemned relativism in history, along with Marxism and positivism. And four years after Davos (in “The Religious Situation,” 1932), Tillich had referred directly to the “modern theory of relativity,” which eliminates “every absolute point of reference.” To be sure, he said, the theory of relativity “has revealed more clearly than was previously apparent the infinity
of existence.” But Tillich warned the theory “shrouds the true nature in deeper mystery than before.”

Toward the end of his life, Tillich wrote a set of essays, published posthumously in 1967 with the forthright title My Search for Absolutes. One chapter has the heading “Absolutes in human knowledge and the idea of truth”, going back to a basic theme in the writings of Schelling. In that chapter, Tillich confides as follows: “My choice of this subject was made out of a feeling of uneasiness—uneasiness about the victory of relativism in all realms of thought and life today…a total victory.” “The sea of relativities…threatens to overwhelm us.” While Tillich did not refer there directly to Einstein’s work, he was bothered by what he called “the great spectacle of scientific relativism….But what we have here is a game,” because scientists are now dealing not with reality but with “models.” The same relativism, Tillich said, can be found in contemporary positivistic philosophy and “in the growth of ethical relativism….Also, there is the great and increasing relativism in…religion,…in the secularist criticism of religion.”

Against this “stream” of relativisms, Tillich wrote, he stood for Absolutes. They “make language possible, understanding possible, and truth possible.” Absolutes are at the bottom of “the moral imperative”. Indeed, “the experience of the Absolute-itself is experience of the holy, the sacred.”

When I read this, and considered that these two men had met in Davos, and that Tillich had thought for a long time about Einstein and relativity, for better or worse, I decided to look into the Einstein Archive. That collection contains, among its 45,000 documents, Einstein’s correspondence with a huge number of scholars, scientists and
other intellectuals. I searched there for any letter exchange between Tillich and Einstein. But there are only three mailings, all from Tillich, and none addressed to philosophical issues. One is an appeal to join in helping yet another refugee from Nazism, another is a request to join an organization of Self-help for German Émigrés, which Tillich headed for 15 years, and the third is Tillich’s analysis in 1942 of the war aims of the Allies. The content of all those mailings were fully in accord with Einstein’s well-known views. But we do not know whether Einstein replied to any of them. On that, the Archive is silent.

* * *

It had started so auspiciously, with those great minds assembled on that meadow on the Zauberberg in 1928, having come there with a common sense of service. Our two protagonists had so much in common. They had been exposed to the same holistic cultural inheritance, as well as the same dangers. Each worked seriously in his own way on an integration, unification and reconciliation of different areas of culture, including science and religion. Each had produced a commanding system in his field. Each had carefully and with much pain developed his system over a long period, making this self-appointed task the very center of his life. And when we look at their main legacies, there stands out forcefully one common theme: The quest for the unification of apparent irreconcilables. For Einstein it was, as we have seen, to try to bring together the major fields of physics, and from there to construct for himself even a religion that was fused with his cosmological thoughts.

Tillich, author of several synthesis-seeking works, wrote in the Foreword of the first edition of his 1923 book, Das System der Wissenschaften, as follows: “All Wissenschaften function in the service of one truth, and Wissenschaft collapses if it loses
the sense of connection of the whole.” One of his courses at Harvard had the breathtaking title “Religion, Art, and Science.” In his search for a synthesis, Tillich was trying to develop a theological and religious position as ambitious and advanced as what Einstein was attempting in his own field. Tillich called his work once “the experiment to which my whole life is dedicated, the reunion of what eternally belongs together but what has been separated in history”.

So we may be tempted, finally, to think that these two kindred spirits might well have developed a mutual Elective Affinity, if only they had been brought together for heart-to-heart discussions. One can imagine what they could have said to each other, being both culture-carriers of the old sort, deeply admiring many of the same classic philosophers, above all Spinoza, and also having inherited much of 19th-century sensibilities, including sensitivity to what has been called the vocabulary of the scientific sublime, “reverence and awe, reason and progress.” That a Personal God is a symbol instead of a mere anthropomorphic fantasy might have been acceptable to Einstein. He might not have objected to Tillich’s definition, “The ultimate concern is unconditional…total....” In turn, it would have appealed to Tillich that Einstein’s relativity was as much a search for Absolutes as was Tillich’s Systematic Theology; and conversely, Einstein would of course have agreed to oppose the false uses of the word “relativity.”

But we must avoid imagining such a “Happy Ending”. Protagonists at such exalted levels tend to persist in their life’s program with a certain stubbornness. They tend to cling fiercely to their thematic presuppositions. In fact, that is part of their
strength. Einstein and Niels Bohr, too, while deeply respecting each other, never deviated, during their long debates, from their divergent views.

The differences we saw between Einstein and Tillich are for us in fact an advantage: They have sharpened our understanding of their respective intellectual landscapes. And the similarities in their ambitious programs gave us two exemplars of true Questers, who devoted their lives to complementary searches, each animated by his own ultimate concern.