

OBITER SCRIPTA ON CHRISTOLOGY

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1) ". . . it is one question whether an assertion is in some sense objectively true and quite another question whether anyone believes it to be true, either by reflectively assenting to it, or by affirming it existentially. Consequently, while I have no difficulty understanding that, unless an assertion is believed true, it cannot be believed true, I have the greatest difficulty in believing, if not in understanding, that, unless an assertion is believed true, it cannot be true. . . . I quite agree with Tillich that 'the Christian event' is not only the 'fact' of Jesus the Christ, but also the 'believing reception' of that fact, which is constitutive of the community of the church and its witness. What I wish to challenge, however, is his claim that 'the receptive side of the Christian event is as important as the factual side' (ST, II, 99). Even though there would be no Christian event at all, properly speaking, but for the coming into being of the church as the community of faith and witness, it is of the essence of that very faith and witness to confess their entire dependence on the 'fact' to which they are but the response. To this extent, Tillich's claim and his talk of the 'necessary interdependence' of fact and reception obscures the profound assymetry of the relation between them."

2) ". . . the ordinary distinction between 'fact' and 'possibility' is apt to obscure the several ways in which these terms, like the phenomena to which they refer, are related to one another. . . . Not only the actualization of a possibility, but also the re-presentation of a possibility is a fact, and therefore capable of being the referent of a name or phrase that is held to refer to a fact and not merely to a possibility. Accordingly, I submit that the 'fact' to which the phrase, 'Jesus the Christ' refers may be interpreted as the re-presentation of the possibility of the New Being rather than as the actualization of that possibility. In that case, just as certainly as in the other, the New Being would have ceased to be merely 'a quest and an expectation' (ST, II, 98), and one could even say with Tillich that estrangement would thereby have been conquered 'in principle,' or 'in beginning and in power' (ST, II, 98). For what is to be understood by 'in power' if not real possibility, and what would the re-presentation of such possibility be if not the 'beginning' of its actualization?"

3) ". . . what faith itself may be said to 'guarantee' is not the actualization of the New Being in one personal life, but, rather, the re-presentation of the New Being as faith's own possibility--or, in other words, what faith guarantees is the witness of faith, to which faith itself is always the response; or, in still other words, what faith guarantees is Jesus the Christ himself, who is precisely the witness of faith, the noncompressible core of the church's continuing witness, which both constitutes that witness as the meaning the witness expresses and is constituted by it as that meaning actually expressed. This assumes, naturally, that by 'Jesus the Christ' something else is meant than 'the historical Jesus' . . . in the sense of the Jesus disclosed by historical-critical research. . . . It is not 'the historical Jesus' in this sense who either is or ever has been the foundation of Christian faith and theology. Their only foundation, rather, is close to what Tillich . . . calls 'the biblical picture of Jesus' (ST, II, 115), and closer still to what Van Harvey speaks of more discriminatingly as 'the

perspectival image of Jesus' and 'the biblical Christ,' the latter understood as interpretive of the former on the basis of faith's affirmation of the claim to truth that the former implies. . . . what created the church and creates it still is no more 'the actual Jesus' . . . than it is 'the historical Jesus' but only the memory image of Jesus received and interpreted by faith, and thus also what Harvey means by 'the biblical Christ.' Of course, this image and this interpretation of the image by faith have presented themselves right from the beginning as the image and interpretation of the actual Jesus as received by faith in his own actual witness. And, as Bultmann has said in a very similar context, there is an 'overwhelming probability' that this is exactly what they are (Jesus, 16). But to what extent, if any, they really are so is a question that historical research alone is competent to answer. So far as faith itself is concerned, Tillich's judgment is entirely correct, that 'faith can guarantee only its own foundation'--only that . . . is not . . . the actualization of faith but, rather, its re-presentation, . . . not the actual Jesus or the historical Jesus but Jesus the Christ of memory and faith, who is encountered nowhere else than in the witness of faith for the very good reason that he not only constitutes that witness but is also constituted by it."

4) ". . . it is impossible to establish, on the basis of any kind of reductive argument, that actualization of the New Being in the one personal life named Jesus of Nazareth is a necessary condition of the possibility of our own actualization of the New Being through the participation of faith. But . . . there would appear to be only one other way left whereby to establish it--namely, some form or other of historical argument, which would proceed to this conclusion through historical-critical analysis of the relevant New Testament sources concerning Jesus. . . . Yet not only do all the relevant New Testament sources fail to provide the kind of data that would be necessary to sustain such an argument . . . but there is the further, far more serious difficulty that any such argument seems bound to fail by the very nature of the case."

5) ". . . the legendary and mythological elements in the biblical witnesses all function to give expression to the meaning or significance of the historical elements as these are understood from the standpoint of the memory and faith that are at the bottom of the entire New Testament testimony. . . . Thus the few references to Jesus' obedience to God, to his surmounting of temptations, and to his acceding to God's will even in the face of death are all capable of being explained in exactly the same way in which we must explain the narratives of his miraculous conception and birth, of his nature miracles, and of his empty tomb--namely, as legends, expressive of the experienced and affirmed authority of his actual words and deeds. . . . what even the Synoptic Gospels really intend to affirm is not so much that Jesus actualized something as that he re-presents something--a possibility of self-understanding, which he ever continues to re-present in and through their own witness as man's authentic possibility."

6) ". . . the ground of Christian faith is a re-presented possibility of self-understanding--that possibility, namely, re-presented by the words, deeds, and tragic destiny of the remembered Jesus of Nazareth--together with the claim that that possibility is my authentic possibility, because it is the possibility opened up for me by the gracious action of God himself. Accordingly, what I must--but also may--mean when I affirm with Chalcedon that Jesus is 'true man' is that I am here and now actually

confronted with a possibility of self-understanding. That is, I thereby acknowledge that this possibility is actually re-presented to me as an event of my own existence and not merely as an idea or a general truth. On the other hand, what I must--but also may--mean when I affirm with Nicaea that Jesus is 'true God' is that the very possibility thus re-presented to me is God's own gift and demand with respect to my existence. Viewed from the standpoint of faith and Scripture, then, the 'substantial truth' of the councils is the wholly existential truth that I am here and now totally accepted and totally claimed, being thereby freed both from and for myself and all others within the encompassing mystery of pure unbounded love. This is the truth which is expressed in the New Testament by the confession that Jesus is the Christ; and the value of the christological dogma, so far as it has any value, is entirely dependent on its being a more or less adequate witness to this same existential truth."

7) ". . . the event which is the foundation of faith . . . is the re-presentation of the possibility of authentic faith in God, which takes place in and through the Christian witness, either implicit or explicit."

8) ". . . the interesting thing about re-presentation . . . is that it refuses to fit into the neat dichotomous distinction between event and symbol. While what is re-presented is re-presented through symbols, that it is re-presented is not a symbol but an event, albeit a different event from other events historically continuous with it and antecedent to it. There is every reason to suppose that the event constituted by the occurrence of the Christian witness takes its origin historically in the real execution of Jesus by the Romans and in the (re-)emergence sometime after his death and in spite of it of faith in him as the Christ of God. But those events are not the event of the Christian witness, nor are they the event in which Christian faith has its abiding ground and object. . . . the events which the central symbols of cross and resurrection immediately and directly presuppose are the divine-human event of the Christian witness itself--the symbol of the cross serving mainly to express the possibility of self-understanding re-presented in that witness, the symbol of the resurrection serving mainly to re-present it as God's own possibility for man. . . . So far as faith is concerned, as distinct from historical-critical research, the events of cross and resurrection are the event of the Christian witness as re-presenting God's own witness to all mankind. . . . The certainty of faith extends no further than the certainty of its own ground; and, while . . . that ground includes a human or historical event just as surely as it includes the divine event of God's grace, the historical event it includes is the event of the Christian witness--not such events as may, with even the highest degree of probability, be established by research as the historical conditions of that witness. . . . The certainty of faith is one thing, while the certainty--or, rather, the probability--of historical judgments is another."

9) ". . . the New Testament understanding of cross and resurrection, like its understanding of Christ in every other respect, is always the understanding of him in his meaning for us, not in his being in himself. Because this is so, its crucial distinctions do not pertain so much to his subjection and victory as events in themselves, as, rather, to our subjection and victory in and through him--to our being judged and forgiven by God insofar as we are crucified with Christ and also raised with him."

10) "What the cross . . . is understood to mean symbolically is not Jesus' having been subjected to the conditions of existence--that, rather, is simply taken for granted--but God's having graciously judged the world in the cross. Hence, so far as the New Testament has any interest at all in what Tillich takes to be referred to by his phrase 'symbols of subjection,' its interest is precisely in so presenting such referents, even if in legendary and mythical terms, that they will be understood to be preparatory for, or corroborative of, what, in the New Testament sense, which is hardly Tillich's, is meant by 'symbols of victory.' Otherwise put, all the New Testament symbols are, in its sense, symbols of victory; for they are symbols expressing the decisive significance of Christ for us as the event of God's own gracious judgment."

11) "There is a difference, it seems to me, between saying (1) that the foundation of Christian faith is simply independent of historical research and judgment; and (2) that the foundation of Christian faith does not need to be established by historical research and also cannot be undermined by it. If the object of theological reflection is itself historically determined in that the faith it seeks to understand is accessible even existentially, thanks only to its mediation by this quite particular Christian tradition, the foundation of Christian faith cannot be simply independent of historical inquiry. This is so, whether that foundation be taken--as with Tillich, say--as an event of the remote historical past, or, rather, as the event of one's present encounter with the witness of faith. On the other hand, one can maintain that faith as such necessarily presupposes its own conditions of possibility, which faith alone is sufficient to establish and which, given faith, cannot be undermined by any historical research. What makes Tillich's attempt to maintain this in the case of his understanding of the foundation of faith unconvincing is that he cannot show that that foundation is, in fact, necessary to faith. On his understanding, it is historical research alone that could establish the foundation, though, ironically, it is not competent to do so, either in fact or in principle."

12) "Jesus is the Christ not because he actualized the possibility of faith and, unlike us, actualized it perfectly, but because he re-presents the possibility of faith and, for us, re-presents it decisively."

13) "Even if Jesus had in fact actualized the possibility of faith, it is a fact that as such could make no difference whatever to me as regards my own faith. For (i) I could never know it to be a fact; and (ii) even if I could, the question would remain whether faith is also a possibility for me."