

## TILLICH, SELF-TRANSCENDENCE, AND I (OR WHY I BECAME CHRISTIAN)<sup>1</sup>

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*The goal of a Christian, especially a regenerated Christian, in the 21st century is to tell the story of the various shapes that his religious position underwent with the hope that other unbelievers may follow his footsteps, that is, from a belief in God to atheism and agnosticism, and back to a belief in God. He tries to show by using the arguments of Paul Tillich how the limits of language enabled him to transcend the agnosticism of Bertrand Russell.*

### INTRODUCTION

Bertrand Russell (1957, 3-23) wrote the essay, “Why I am not a Christian,” and explained his agnostic position. He rejected all arguments for or against the existence of God by showing their logical flaws. He tried to explain the origin of religious belief, and he identified fear—that is, the fear of death, of misfortune, of the unknown—and the desire to have an elder brother to rely on in times of distress.

Russell is a mathematical logician who is known for intellectual integrity. His agnosticism hinges on intellectual honesty. To believe in the existence or nonexistence of God—to become a theist or atheist in spite of the logical errors of their respective arguments—is to be intellectually dishonest. Agnosticism is the neutral logically honest ground. It was said that if he would meet God after death, he would ask Him “why He had not given humanity more evidence of His existence,” which shows why even the wisest of doubters understand only little of Christianity (see Coren 2006).

Richard Dawkins (2007, 73), in his book *The God delusion*, tries to show the different grades of agnosticism and argues that the pure agnostic position is ephemeral. The agnostic in practice has either a theistic or an atheistic leaning. In Dawkins’s gradation of seven levels, it would appear that the Russellian type is much closer to atheism. The neopragmatic Richard Rorty (see Apolega 2008, 117-21) argues that many people dwell on intellectual positions they could not consistently keep in practice. The skeptic, for one, believes that knowledge is impossible but pragmatically behaves in the world as if knowledge is possible. A very good example is Gorgias (see Russell 1945, 78)

who argued that nothing existed. If something existed, it could not be known. If it could be known, it could not be expressed. But he lived in this world as if he actually existed. Russell intellectually held an agnostic position but pragmatically acted in the world as if there was no God.

## **MY RELIGIO-INTELLECTUAL POSITION**

Born and baptized as a Roman Catholic, I was reared in my mother's version of Roman Catholicism. Although both my parents were Roman Catholics, my mother was more devout, more God-fearing, and more religiously disciplined. Despite the family's modest means, she was instrumental, after my graduation from Butuan Central Elementary School, in enrolling me in the Jesuit school, Fr. Urios College (now Fr. Saturnino Urios University). My secondary schooling was smooth as I studied the usual high school subjects, especially the catechism in my religious classes. We started the class with a prayer and, in some classes, we ended with a prayer. As trained by my mother, I did not miss going to church on days prescribed by my religious teachers.

Among my high school subjects, mathematics, especially algebra, was my favorite. I spent many hours every night to study the problems of algebra. My fascination with algebra must have been because, on my own examination of my intellectual preferences, I am less emotional than rational. I have a stoical bent of mind. On many occasions, during times of distress, I can plug my emotions with indifference and proceed doing things as if nothing has happened. Very rarely did I allow my emotions to overflow, but they were always on check and tempered by my reason.

I always considered God to be a reasonable Being. I believed that my reason partook of the nature of God. I studied the Catechism seriously. The Catechism is the combined teachings of the Scriptures and the traditions of the Church. In religious classes, our Biblical studies were always guided by our religious teachers. Our young impressionable minds were guided by the Catechism and the interpretations of our religion teachers so that we may not misinterpret the Scriptures and end up heretical.

### **My Break with Roman Catholicism**

My teacher in religion was strict and she made it appear that her interpretations were the infallibly correct one. She required us to go to church and hear mass every morning of Wednesdays, first Fridays of the month, Sundays, and during holy days. Attendance was checked and included in the computation of the grades. I generally walked the distance from the house to the church for about twenty minutes because I liked to walk and not everyday did I have money for fare.

I was the student who wanted to excel and my study habit was such that I began my studies before supper until the wee hours in the morning. I stopped only to take supper. I tried to finish all the assigned readings and all the assignments. If you have about eight subjects, you could just imagine the number of hours to spend studying the lessons. I slept only three to four hours almost everyday.

The conflict arose between the desire to excel and the requirement in going to church every Wednesday morning. In most cases I was late and marked absent. In my

young mind, I was then a sophomore, I could not reconcile God's understanding and benevolence with the strict requirements of the religion teacher. And everytime I was marked absent I rebelled against God. It was a psychological type of falling out. I became a psychological atheist (see William and Mabel Sahakian 1970, 225-26). If God is understanding and benevolent, how could He allow such a religion teacher to be so strict with church attendance that prevented me to excel overall?

### **Why I Transferred to Agusan High School**

Being a public school, Agusan High School (now Agusan National High School) did not have a religion subject. My sophomore grades at Fr. Urios College were high enough that I qualified to be placed in section 1, which—among six third year sections<sup>2</sup>—was the crop of the cream. In all the new subjects in my last two years in high school, I liked trigonometry best. Of course, I also liked literature, world history, biology, physics, and chemistry. The subject I hated most was Spanish, for I considered it useless.<sup>3</sup>

I did not make it to the top, but graduating salutatorian in 1965 was good enough for me. I passed the full scholarship examinations of the Mindanao State University and I began my first year college at a place far from “civilization.” The campus—a thousand hectares and perched high above the plains—was sprawling and it overlooked Marawi City, some four kilometers away, and the majestic Lake Lanao. It was very peaceful in the city as we students walked our way home from the Palitan (Market) to the campus at 6:00 or 7:00 o'clock in the evening.

### **My Religio-Intellectual Position in College**

I remained an atheist during my freshman year, and my concentration on mathematics in a Chemical Engineering course did not satisfy my longing for some religious answers. My introduction to a philosophy course happened when a peace corps volunteer, Mr. David Wiley, taught symbolic logic that summer. The logic course was boring, not until I began to read more on logical theory or philosophical logic. It is in the foundations that interesting discussions can be found. Certain debatable concepts in logical theory are presented in applied logic as if these have already been settled, such as the concept of the *proposition* (see Grialdo 2001, 2010). Anyway, at the middle of the symbolic logic course, logical applications began to be more interesting. It was also at this time that I began reading the works of Bertrand Russell, the logician and philosopher.

I shifted to philosophy in my second year and decided to read more on Russell. It was at this time that I became an agnostic.

Russell's religious position is simple. To reiterate, as a logician, Russell would like to be intellectually honest. He studied all the works that attempted to prove God's existence and discovered their logical flaws. He also studied all the demonstrations to the contrary, arguing that God does not exist, and found them full of loopholes, too. To believe that there is God or there is no God is to be intellectually dishonest. Agnosticism is the intellectually honest position. However, agnosticism is understandable basically for intellectuals. It is much simpler, says Russell (1947), to just say to an unschooled that he (Russell) is an atheist, for then no necessary explanation is needed.<sup>4</sup>

## RUSSELL'S NEUTRAL MONISM

After obtaining my B.A. Philosophy degree (cum laude) in 1969,<sup>5</sup> I taught for a while some philosophy subjects in Butuan City and in mid-November 1970 I joined the teaching force of the Mindanao State University. Up to this time, Lanao del Sur was relatively peaceful. On 10 April 1971, my article, "The soul and Bertrand Russell" appeared in the *Philippines Free Press*. This article explains my metaphysical position at that time.

The ancient Greeks asked the question, "What is the basic stuff of the universe?" Several answers were given: water, air, fire, numbers, and so on. Modern theoretical physics gives us energy as in Einstein's formula  $E = mc^2$ . The formula says that energy is equal to the mass of an object times the speed of light squared. In the first law of thermodynamics, energy is said to be neither created nor destroyed. It was, is, will be there forever. It seems to be eternal. It seems to have the characteristics of God.

Reality is therefore a process, as Alfred North Whitehead (1929) says, a field of force, a field of incessant activity. In the substratum of the universe, there was nothing substantial, only constant flux. It is like an ocean. Physicist James Jeans (1943, 193-94) describes it as "a deep-flowing stream below which we cannot see. Events deep down in the stream throw up bubbles and eddies in the surface of the stream"—the radiation and transfers of energy we perceive. These bubbles and eddies show atomicity but no corresponding atomicity exists down below.

Some people identify this cosmic process as mental. Keith Chandler (2001, 276-96) calls it Cosmic Mind that works out ideas which are tested in the material universe. The evolutionary process has gaps and discontinuities. Ideas tested to be flawed are discontinued. That is why, Chandler explains, the so-called "missing link" in the evolution of man is actually *not missing* but faulty ideas which God discontinued. The Hindus believe the cosmic mind is Brahman who manifests Himself in various forms as destroyer and preserver, etc. The pantheists identify the universe with God and God with the universe.

The materialists believe that energy is simply a rarefied form of matter. If water, as Thales (Russell 1945) contends, is the ultimate material of the universe, then air—as Anaximenes (Russell 1945) holds—is simply a rarefied form of water.<sup>6</sup> But water and air, as well as matter and energy, must be one and the same thing. Following the first law of thermodynamics, matter—like energy—was, is, and will be existing eternally, just transformed from one form to another.

Russell (1962, 141-44) argues that in reducing matter to energy, modern physics actually makes matter less and less material. On the other hand, in reducing mental events to bodily (brain) events, physiological psychology makes mind less and less mental. There is something miraculous in our perception. We perceive a material object outside us; light rays carrying the configuration of the object travel to the eyes and cause a physical process; then this process travels to the optic nerves where another physical process takes place. Eventually this physical process travels to the brain, and that is the time we *mentally* see the object. In one sense, therefore, what is out there is in here—in us—in our minds. As Russell (1927; 1967, 607) says, "What the physiologist sees when he examines a brain is in the physiologist, not in the brain he is examining." From these premises, Russell concludes that the ultimate reality, the basic stuff of the

universe, which is in constant flux, is *neutral*—neither mental nor material—but out of which both mind and matter come into existence.

### **Transition to Language**

The year 1970 was the beginning of major conflicts in the Philippines, and these trickled down to Lanao del Sur. There were reports of Christians and Muslims abducted and missing. It was not safe anymore to walk or ride a jeepney from the campus to Palitan and back at night, especially in 1971. On 21 September 1972 martial law was declared and in one month's time, the Marawi City rebellion took place. Classes were suspended for several months and most of us non-Muslims resided in Iligan City, some thirty-seven kilometers away from Marawi City. The MSU campus was virtually a ghost town.

Fortunately, our salaries were continued and I used the idle time in reading books. What I did not study formally or extensively—like Chinese philosophy, Buddhism, Japanese philosophy, Hinduism, and contemporary Western philosophy such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, John Austin, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus, among others—I voraciously read. Dr. Quiterio Miravite, once the dean of the College of Liberal Arts at MSU, was an expert in Indian philosophy (he obtained his Ph.D. in India), but unfortunately I was never his student. Earlier, in the summer of 1972, I went to Manila and took two philosophy classes but I had some financial difficulties at the time. I thought MSU would support my accommodation but did not. I did not continue my formal studies and went home. I was able to photocopy some important philosophy books, however, particularly in the Philosophy of Language.

Classes resumed in June 1973, but by this time MSU awarded me a full scholarship to take up my M.A. in philosophy at the University of the Philippines. The scholarship grant included my full monthly salary, tuition, travel, stipend, book allowance, and accommodation.

The area of concentration of UP was the Anglo-American analytic tradition, especially the Philosophy of Language. The chair of the UP Philosophy Department at the time, Dr. Armando F. Bonifacio, was fresh from his doctoral stint at the University of California at Berkeley where he specialized in the Philosophy of Language. He said that John Searle was his teacher. My transcript of records is full of subjects in the Philosophy of Language, except a course each in Scholasticism, Immanuel Kant, and a History of Psychology (cognate). In particular, I had five courses in the various topics of the philosophy of language, a course each in the philosophy of mind, contemporary ethical theory (metaethics), logical theory, theory of knowledge (epistemology), and two audit subjects in linguistics. In other words, I had 33 units of philosophy subjects, 3 units of cognate subject, and 6 units of audit, or a total of 42 units, excluding 6 units of my master's thesis, which was on the analysis of the concept "free choice."<sup>7</sup>

I entered UP as an agnostic and I remained an agnostic until I left UP for MSU in 1975.

### **My Fascination with Language**

We know the world through language, whether verbal or sign (including gestures and body language). Anyway, a verbal language—spoken or written—is a form of a sign language. Words are signs.

We know the world through others. The infant knows the existence of others, particularly the mother initially, through its interaction with her. Then it learns language from her, then from the father, and from the others. It attempts to mimic the sounds. It knows the world outside itself before it even knows itself. As Ludwig Wittgenstein (1958, §241-360) says, there is no private language that is only in memory because it is difficult to check on the reliability of such a language and once it is written down, it becomes a public coded language that can be decoded and understood by others. Verbal language is public: it is always meant for interactive communication, or to put it differently, it is meant for communicative *interaction*.

But the world embedded in language is a limited world. This is the *passive* part of language which the child learns from the others. There is certainly much more than in the metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, etc., underpinnings of one's language. The attempt to get out from this trap is to use language to build one's own world through one's ideas. This is the *active* part of language, but then one's world is still limited by one's language. Wittgenstein says that we should not allow language to bewitch us like the fly which believes that the world is contained within its flybottle. The aim of philosophy, Wittgenstein (1958, § 309) maintains, is to "shew the fly the way out of the flybottle." Since our view is that the *Weltanschauung* embedded in one's language (flybottle)—passive or active—is a limited world, it seems, therefore, that our task is to get out from the flybottle, or at any rate, to transcend or free ourselves from the world of the flybottle and appreciate a much higher transcendent and/or mystical world. Plato (1956, 312-15) has a similar metaphor in the parable of the cave. We have to free our minds from the shadows of the cave we used to "know" because out there we can see the real world—true knowledge rather than mere opinions. A Tao master, Lao Tzu (1995, ch. 56), says in effect that reality is beyond language: "Those who know don't talk. Those who talk don't know."

## SOME OBSERVATIONS ON ATHEISM AND AGNOSTICISM

### Atheism

I studied the arguments of atheism for many years before I finally shifted to agnosticism. My observation is that atheism cannot condemn the religious attitude towards, or faith, in God because atheism itself is a matter of attitude rather than a matter of cognitive knowledge. No atheist to my mind has really succeeded in proving the nonexistence of God. The atheist generally simply reacts negatively to the proofs for God's existence. Richard Dawkins (2007), e.g., presents in his book, *The God delusion*, the proofs for God's existence and cites the flaws of each argument. Having refuted the proofs, the atheist argues in an *argumentum ad ignorantiam* fashion that there is no God because no one can successfully prove God's existence.

I did not find the problem of evil even convincing to negate God's existence since we can accept and explain the presence of evils, as in Baruch Spinoza and Gottfried von Leibnitz, without necessarily rejecting God. Spinoza (1985) says that good and evil are only a human, not a divine, distinction because from God's point of view, everything is good, while Leibnitz (1952) argues that evils are a necessary component of this world,

which is the best of all possible worlds. The more compelling atheistic argument is the eternity of matter and energy. According to the first law of thermodynamics, matter and energy cannot be created or destroyed but only transformed from one form to another (law on conservation of matter and energy). The God hypothesis is unnecessary because matter is eternal; it has been there for all eternity. I think that the eternity of matter is valid only from the point of view of man, but not necessarily from God's point of view. Man cannot create matter, energy, and the laws of nature but God—if we grant his reality—can. God makes it possible for energy, matter, and the first law of thermodynamics to come into being.

### **Agnosticism**

As an intellectual position, I find agnosticism difficult to practice without being predisposed to act either in sympathy with the theist or the atheist. While Russell acted as if there was no God in the world, my inclination is to act as if there is God in the world. The problem is to find a justification or an explanation for this sympathy to theism. I find this explanation from the theological system of Paul Tillich.

What attracts me to Tillich is his view of language as an existential instrument for dialogic communication and understanding. God as the ground of existence cannot be described in existential terms. Language is therefore an inadequate mode of reaching God, the *mystical a priori*.

### **TILLICH AND SELF-TRANSCENDENCE**

There is in Russell (1962, 142) a seed of transcendence when he argues that reality, in a manner of speaking, is beyond our conceptions of mind and matter. Reality for Russell is neither mind nor matter but is something neutral—it is a neutral monism. Both mind and matter were like the lion and the unicorn fighting for the crown—that is, whether reality is mental or material—only to discover that both of them were “heraldic inventions.” From the perspective of physics, matter is becoming less and less material while from the perspective of physiological psychology, mind is becoming less and less mental.

Tillich says that reality has been depicted in many ways. Whether such a reality is called “Cosmic Universe,” the “Unknowable,” “Cosmic Mind,” “neutral monism,” etc., such a reality—in its ultimate nature—can be found because it has always been there as a *mystical a priori*.

### **Theory of Correlation**

Tillich argues that what is of concern to us is our own human experiences, and in certain moments of our lives we have deep experiences. Many of us in our own individual lifetimes have undergone or felt an ultimate concern, and it is *experienced ultimately*. Tillich (1951, 1:50; 1963, 3:292) talks of Jesus as the Christ as the ultimate concern for many people, or at any rate, it is his ultimate concern. For God manifests Himself in Jesus as the Christ, or in Jesus the God-Man, the New Being. The content of this ultimate concern is projective in nature, but it is not projected out there but it is

projected to a spirituality that a person intimately experiences *deeply* within himself or herself. Human situational experiences of this kind are existential and usually generate philosophical questions. This is because existence itself, contends Tillich (1957, 2:25), is “estrangement and not reconciliation...dehumanization and not the expression of essential humanity...man becomes a thing and ceases to be a person.” Human existence is “filled with anxiety and the threat of meaninglessness.”

These existential experiences have a correlation theologically, and the theological answers to their questions can be found correlatively in the Holy Scriptures. As Tillich (1957, 1: 61) says:

[M]an’s essential being [is] the unity of his finitude with the infinity in which he was created...and from which he is separated...A symptom of both the essential unity and the existential separation of finite man from his infinity in his ability to ask about the infinite to which he belongs: the fact that he must ask about it indicates that he is separated from it.

If these Biblical answers, through the norm of the “New Being in Jesus as the Christ,” may not be completely adequate, other sources may be considered, such as the church tradition and the history of religion and culture. The Christ in Jesus brings in the New Being when it overcomes the existential anguish, estrangement, conflicts, historical predicament, and the like (Tillich 1957, 2:118-20). The form of the theological answer is determined by the questions that arise from our existential experiences.

### **Idea of God**

God for Tillich (1951, 1:156, 240) is the ground of beings, the ground of the ontological structure of being, or He is Being Himself. God is beyond language, beyond description, beyond essence and existence. Anything that exists is finite. To say that God exists is to circumscribe Him within the realm of finiteness. To say He does not exist is only to suggest that *existence* is a finite linguistic existential category, not befitting of a Being which is the ground of existence, or of beings, for God is not a being but Being Himself. We can know God because within the structure of our finitude we are aware of the transcendental projection to infinity (Tillich 1951, 1:239). This awareness is called *self-transcendence*. In view of the finiteness of language, there is therefore no point in proving the existence of God. It is this aspect of Tillich which, to my mind, immediately disarms the atheist and agnostic who expect a proof for God’s existence.

God as nonexistent can only manifest Himself to us in the Holy Scriptures (see Tillich 1963, 3:369), or to divinely inspired prophets, who penned down His revelations to us in a language that is understandable to us. Moreover, it is a language that is directly understandable to the people of the times, and it can be interpreted and reinterpreted over the years and centuries. Eternal Life whereby all beings are taken up into the Divine Life is the end of history (Tillich 1963, 3:356-64).

Existence is always existentially experienced in various finite modes. These have theological presuppositions, implications, underpinnings, or consequences. These

modes of existence must have theological correlations in the Holy Scriptures and their spiritual significance or meanings must be hermeneutically deciphered. If God is Being Himself—that is, the ground of being—then Non-Being would be impossible, for that would be tantamount to denying or negating our very own existence, which we existentially and concretely experience.

### **Idea of Self-Transcendence**

Whatever concerns us ultimately is experienced *concretely* and *transcendentally*. Tillich calls this as self-transcendence, a mode of experience whereby we transcend our finitude but at the same time remain rooted in our concrete existential situation. Self-transcendence is not an empirical experience but a psychological experience of depth (sometimes labeled as a “mystical” experience). People oftentimes call that concrete ultimate concern “god.” For many people, since it is felt with depth, it circumscribes the whole meaning of their individual lives, both spiritually and physically. It can take the form of money, career, family, or whatever. But this is not the *genuine* ultimate concern, which is transcendental and which we call “God.” The transcendental ultimate concern is the ultimate transcendental concern which merges our *concrete* religious concern with the *ultimate* divine concern: it resolves, says Tillich (1951, 1;208), our experience of anxiety toward concrete nonbeing or nothingness.

### **CONCLUSION**

I read Tillich, together with Russell, when I was in college, but while I could understand Russell, I could not fully understand Tillich—not until I became engrossed with the philosophical study of language. “The limits of my language,” says Wittgenstein (1958, §5.6), “mean the limits of my world.” My kind of world is, therefore, determined by the limits of my language. Arthur Schopenhauer (1969) earlier remarked that his own world is his will and idea, thereby suggesting the inherent limits of his world as configured by his will and his linguistic conceptualizations. One’s genuine ultimate concern transcends language. It has to be experienced with depth and intimacy; it has to be experienced both in the concrete and in transcendence; it is an experience in self-transcendence. The realization that logic or technical reason and even existential or ontological reason cannot work without language shows to me that both are subject to the limitations and finitude of language. Both types of reason will have to be transcended to reach out for the divine ultimate concern. This realization somehow enabled me to escape from or transcend the atheistic inclination of Russellian agnosticism. This is how I became a Christian.

### **NOTES**

1. Paper presented during the conference on “The Role of Christian Thinkers in the Global Age,” Chung Yuan Christian University (CYCU), Chung Li, Taiwan, 11-14 December 2008.

2. With the help of my classmates, Lidwina Bolotaolo Concon and Dr. Vicente Cembrano Jr., we were able to identify these sections: four college preparatory and two vocational.

3. Its usefulness came to me later when I concentrated on Filipino philosophy (traditional approach) in my doctoral studies because I had to read, e.g., the Spanish works of Jose Rizal in understanding his philosophy.

4. One may not agree with Russell, however, in this last point. Some people I know believe the unschooled are capable of understanding the agnostic position. When I tried it myself, I succeeded in letting the unschooled understand the agnostic position. But, maybe, the psychological makeup of people's minds during Russell's times was different from the psychological makeup of people's minds during our highly permissive and postmodernist times.

5. I had a good historical background in philosophy in college. Aside from an introduction to philosophy where I had a panoramic view of the field, my philosophy teachers, especially Ross and Christine Kales, grounded me in the history of philosophy from the ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary times. Moreover, I taught these subjects at the Mindanao State University.

6. The argument of Anaximenes was a crude empirical observation, but believable at the time. We know, of course, that air is composed of many elements: oxygen is only about 21% while hydrogen does not appear independently as an element of air, although a tiny amount is found in methane. More accurately, water vapor, which consists of .001% to 5% of air is the rarefied form of water.

7. One might ask why I had so much units (48 units in all) when UP allows only the minimum of 30 units (including thesis) to graduate from the M.A. program. I had a two-year scholarship and I decided to maximize my stay by enrolling more philosophy subjects. I had 12 units during the first semester, 12 units for the second semester, 6 units during summer, 6 units (plus another 6 audit units) in the first semester of the second year and, finally, another 6 units of thesis writing.

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