

# The Mediation in the Human Cognition of God in the Thought of Paul Tillich

MARCIN WALCZAK 

Independent Scholar, marwal8@wp.pl

**Abstract:** Paul Tillich was one of those important theologians of the 20th century who devoted much attention to issues related to theological theory of knowledge. In Tillich's thought, God is the mystery of being infinitely close to man, but human cognition of this mystery is always mediated. This article analyzes the question of mediation in human cognition of God in the thought of the great protestant theologian. First, the mediating, symbolic character of all religious language is presented. Then the mediating nature of theology is analyzed. The third part presents the importance of mediation in human cognition of ultimate reality. The conducted research leads to the conclusion that, according to Tillich, there is no other way of thinking and talking about God than mediated in the created world. God ultimately remains a mystery that is revealed to us through the reality that surrounds us.

**Keywords:** Paul Tillich, mediation, cognition of God, symbol, apophaticism

Mediation plays a key role in human cognition of God. Although God himself is – as Paul Tillich claims – directly present in human life, getting to know Him, discovering his presence and expressing it with words must take place through a certain mediation. What is the role of mediation in human knowledge of God in the light of Paul Tillich's thought? This article will attempt to answer this question. The basic mediator in knowing God is the language, which in the field of religion always remains a symbolic one. The first part of this analysis will be devoted to the issue of religious language. This language reaches its highest form in theology, rational reflection on faith, which is also mediating in its nature. The next part of the article will be devoted to the mediation of theology. After discussing the role of language and theology, there will be a summary of the importance of mediation in human cognition of God. Paul Tillich's thought provides some clues on how to combine the belief in the radical transcendence of God and his closeness to man with the need of mediation in thinking and speaking about the Ultimate Reality.

## 1. The Symbolic Nature of Religious Language

When speaking of the mediating nature of theological knowledge, one cannot ignore the fundamental issue of religious language. It is worth considering briefly

the present context of the question about this issue. First of all, it is almost taken for granted today that language is a particularly privileged tool for learning about reality. Concepts influence human perception of a given aspect of reality, and, according to some thinkers, even shape the reality. The latter approach was represented by Immanuel Kant, according to whom the conceptual grid is something previously present in the knowing subject.<sup>1</sup> This subject imposes his concepts on the world, which then appears to him precisely in the key of these concepts. According to Kant, these are, above all, categories such as: time, space, substance, or cause. 20th and 21st century philosophy with an analytical profile places the problem of language at the center of philosophical issues in general. While for classical metaphysics the problem was the ability of language to describe being, contemporary philosophy makes language a problem in itself. More and more the problem of language is also becoming central to theology. The status of linguistic cognition, the question of the possibility of expressing reality itself in language, take on their final dimension in the theological theory of cognition. Since the object of theology is not *de facto* an object, as it transcends the subject-object structure, the question arises as to how we can speak about it at all.

How could the language touch the Unconditional? First of all, it is worth noting that if a person describes his encounter with reality through language, he describes the objects he meets. God, however, is not an object, so the language, as it seems, should not touch him at all. In such a case, however, theology would be completely unnecessary and inherently wrong. This problem is actually a theological-cognitive continuation of the problem of the end of ontotheology. If God in theism is seen as one of beings, he can undoubtedly be described in language as all other beings are described. However, since God is that which is Unconditional, he cannot, according to Tillich, be directly described in terms of thought and language, which in such a case would condition Him.<sup>2</sup> With language, man expresses his encounter with reality, but one meets God in a completely different way than finite reality. So using language to think and talk about God also seems to be a miss. At first glance, there seems to be no way out of the paradoxical situation of the subject who recognizes God. If he does not want to fall into the idolatry of ontotheology, he must settle for complete silence, which seems impossible in the face of genuine religious experience.

Paul Tillich was very well aware of this paradoxical situation of language in theology. He also had a peculiar answer to the question of the scope and manner of using human language in relation to the Unconditional. First, however, it is worth considering Tillich's critique of the descriptive understanding of the role of religious language. The counterpart of ontotheology at the level of theological theory of knowledge is, according to Tillich, literalism. It is about a vision of the language of religion

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<sup>1</sup> Kant, *Critique*, 394.

<sup>2</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, 82.

in which it literally captures the Ultimate Reality. Literalists think they can describe God as a normal object of knowledge. This manifests itself first especially in the field of biblical exegesis. Literal reading of Scripture is associated with a literal understanding of the events described in the Bible. The crossing of the Red Sea or the stopping of the sun described in the Book of Joshua are seen as some historical facts that happened in exactly the order and form as it is described.<sup>3</sup> Such an interpretation is not only wrong from the point of view of a theological theory of knowledge, but also from the point of view of biblical exegesis itself. The latter has learned to distinguish the literary form of the books of Sacred Scripture from the historical background which is hidden, as it were, under literary descriptions.

According to Paul Tillich, biblical literalism was a great challenge for 20th-century Christianity. This view makes fun of the Christian faith, which in the context of the scientific and technical mentality of modern man appears to be naive and unacceptable.<sup>4</sup> Today, biblical literalism is rather in retreat, it can only be found in certain radical fractions of evangelical Protestantism, especially in the United States.<sup>5</sup> It is especially clear in exegesis how great a trap it is. However, it is not limited to this area. Literalism is a broader phenomenon that encompasses the entirety of thinking and talking about God. It is therefore about understanding and applying statements about God in the same way as making statements about anything else.<sup>6</sup> The literalist treats the Unconditional as an object on which he can speak literally and descriptively. This is often related to the misconception of revelation, according to which it consists in revealing by God some objective facts about himself. If revelation is understood as a self-descriptive statement of God, then it is indeed possible to see in theology a literal description of divine reality based on proven data. According to Paul Tillich, literalism is a tragic error that obscures the essence of religion and the knowledge of God. If you understand him, he is not God, said Saint Augustine.<sup>7</sup> Knowing God cannot mean learning literally about Him. It is a knowledge that always remains a mystery knowledge. The mystery of God can never be fully grasped, therefore the role of language in theological cognition is radically different from the role of language in describing created reality.

The reaction to the fallacy of literalism and the inadequacy of language in the field of theology seems to be simply silence. If language is used to describe objective reality and God transcends this reality, it seems that language cannot be applied to God. Such optics are shared especially by the great religious traditions of the Far East.

<sup>3</sup> According to Tillich, literalism did especially great damage in the exegesis of the first chapters of the Book of Genesis. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, II, 29.

<sup>4</sup> Tillich, "A Reinterpretation," 306.

<sup>5</sup> Zieliński, *Protestantyzm*, 58–59.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Tillich ("Reply," 341) argued: "I believe that this kind of thought is a rationalization of the Biblical symbols into an objectifying description of physical-supraphysical processes."

<sup>7</sup> Augustinus, *Sermo* 52, 16 (PL 38, 360).

Buddhism in particular encourages restraint in the use of language in religion and in spiritual practice in lieu of theological considerations.<sup>8</sup> A summary of this approach would be the famous sentence crowning Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."<sup>9</sup> The solution that is extremely opposite to literalism is therefore a radical apophaticism that manifests itself in absolute silence. However, the fundamental question arises as to whether such far-reaching apophaticism can be sustained at all.

Religious language cannot work as a description, but avoiding this language entirely is perhaps impossible for a person with religious experience. Such a person wants to pass on his experience to others, to give it some expression. In this respect, language is a natural and necessary means of expression. Thus, it is impossible to avoid religious language – it arises automatically as a means of communicating experience. The history of religion also shows that religious language is constant and necessary. Even those religious trends and traditions which eagerly emphasized the inadequacy of language in relation to the infinite mystery of God, at the same time could not completely abandon religious terms. After all, to say that God transcends the world that can be described linguistically requires the use of the word "God." Absolute (silent) apophaticism is an illusion. Bearing in mind the incompatibility of language with the Transcendence, one has to admit that language is a tool of getting to know God and communicating the truth about Him.<sup>10</sup> It cannot, however, be a language used in a metaphysical manner, that is, on the basis of the subject-object structure. The language of theology is not a language of description, there cannot be any literalness here.

Paul Tillich's answer to this problematic status of language in religion and theology is as follows: the language of religion is in its entirety a symbolic language – "man's ultimate concern must be expressed symbolically."<sup>11</sup> It is a language of symbols, it is not a literal description of reality. That is why Karol Karski will say: "One can talk about God – according to Tillich – only with the help of indirect, symbolic statements."<sup>12</sup> This language leaves the mystery character of the Unconditional intact. It is, however, some kind of language, and thus the breaking of apophatic silence. In Tillich's theology, the symbol occupies a central place and is, as noted *inter alia* by Jan A. Kłoczowski, a key concept at all stages of his creativity.<sup>13</sup> A statement is symbolic when it reveals more than its literal content. The symbol, with the help of conditioned reality, points towards the Unconditional. However, it is not a metaphor that can be replaced by a literal description of the fact. That is why Tillich will say:

<sup>8</sup> Tillich, "Christianity and the Encounter," 309–317.

<sup>9</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 90.

<sup>10</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, 241.

<sup>11</sup> Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 44.

<sup>12</sup> Karski, *Teologia*, 83.

<sup>13</sup> Kłoczowski, "Teolog «troski ostatecznej»," 339–340.

“Each symbol reveals a certain layer of reality to which non-symbolic speech has no access.”<sup>14</sup> People use the language of symbols to express what cannot be expressed literally.<sup>15</sup> A feature of the symbol is also that it is not alien to what it is trying to express. Unlike any sign, a symbol is not arbitrary.<sup>16</sup> In himself, what the symbol refers to shines and becomes present. The language of religion has such a symbolic character and cannot have anything else.

Tillich insistently repeats that every sentence about God is symbolic. An exception are metaphysical statements of a borderline nature. “If we say that God is the infinite, or the unconditional, or being-itself, we speak rationally and ecstatically at the same time. These terms precisely designate the boundary line at which both the symbolic and the non-symbolic coincide.”<sup>17</sup> In any case, the language of religion, which breaks down the apparent alternative between literalism and silence, is a symbolic language.<sup>18</sup> It means that the language of religion immediately relates to what is beyond the language. Thus, by the very nature of things, the language of religion not only is symbolic, but also it cannot be otherwise.

Since language can somehow relate to God the question of the purity of the faith expressed in that language arises. The threat of idolatry appears wherever a concept or idea takes the place of God himself. However, it is canceled when the symbol is treated as a symbol. The danger arises only when the symbolic nature of religious utterances becomes known. Such secondary literalism means that even originally symbolic utterances are again understood as objective descriptions of God’s being. In this case, idolatry does take place, because the supposedly described God is not the real God. On the other hand, if one is really aware of the symbolic nature of the religious language, there is no possibility of idolatry. “The relation to Being Itself must be mediated in a specific symbol along with its conditioning and insufficiency.”<sup>19</sup> As Tillich emphasizes, the symbol has a self-contradicting character. Religious language is therefore not idolatrous as long as its symbolic character is kept in mind. It is not easy, however, because Christianity does not lack literalistic tendencies. Every now and then, says Tillich, there is someone trying to depreciate the symbolic nature of religious language. It has been said that since something is “just a symbol,” you shouldn’t really worry about it.<sup>20</sup>

Each symbol shows something of the symbolized reality, but cannot express it fully. Ultimately, it transcends it, and it transcends it infinitely (since this reality itself is infinite). Therefore, each symbol ultimately crosses out itself, pointing to

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<sup>14</sup> Tillich, *Pytanie*, 138.

<sup>15</sup> Tillich, “Religious Symbols,” 397.

<sup>16</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, 239.

<sup>17</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, II, 10.

<sup>18</sup> Tillich, “Existential Analyses,” 396.

<sup>19</sup> Mech, *Chrześcijaństwo i dialektyka*, 138.

<sup>20</sup> Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 45.

something more. If a symbol draws attention to itself, it distorts its meaning. The actual purpose of a symbol is to be lifted above itself, therefore the more perfect the symbol is, the less it holds on to itself. Tillich emphasizes in this context that the crucified Christ is the perfect symbol. Jesus loses his life, denying, in some way, its particular value. The cross is a perfect symbol because it is perfectly auto-negative.<sup>21</sup> Jesus dies in order not to be in the center of attention as Jesus. He is in the spotlight, but as the Risen Christ. The same applies to other religious symbols. All of them are guiding towards God and making him present to some extent, but at the same time they all retain the apophatic dimension of knowledge of the Unconditional intact. From the very beginning, such a radical approach to the matter was met with sharp polemics and accusations of treason in the face of the specificity of the Christian revelation. For example, according to Georges Tavad, to speak of the language of revelation as symbolic is to deny the reality of that language.<sup>22</sup> However, it seems necessary to agree with Tillich. His critics forgot that the reality of revelation did not exclude the basic truth that God could not be grasped by man. Revelation does not end the radical transcendence of God, but even highlights it, making it close to man.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, it seems reasonable to speak of religious language as symbolic. After all, the symbol is not information about God. Immediately after making a symbolic statement about God, it can be denied according to the old principle of negative theology.

An important issue that is also worth paying attention to is the genesis of symbols.<sup>24</sup> As already mentioned, a symbol differs from a sign, since a sign can be set at will, changed and invented by one person. Unlike a sign, a symbol is not something arbitrary. It cannot be freely canceled and a new symbol cannot be inserted in its place. The real symbol is, in some ways, found. The symbol functions within a certain community, it is shaped in the historical development of a given culture. According to Tillich, a symbol never arises arbitrarily, but always arises as if by itself. A single person can neither bring into existence a new symbol, nor destroy a given symbol. The theologian's views are close to those of Carl Gustav Jung, whose influence on Tillich's thought is unquestionable. According to the eminent psychologist, symbols (archetypes) are products of the collective unconscious. So they do not come from a conscious decision or rational speculation of man, but they arise from what is unconscious. Symbols appear to people, it can be said that they are somehow given to them in advance. At the same time, symbols connect people because they are always a social thing, they are always common. There are no private symbols.

However, Tillich's interpretation differs somewhat from that of Jung. For Tillich does not stop at pointing to the collective unconscious as the source of the symbol.

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21 "The symbol of the «Cross of the Christ», which is the center of all Christian symbolism, is perhaps the most radical criticism of all idolatrous self-elevation." Tillich, "Meaning and Justification," 420.

22 Tavad, *Paul Tillich*, 81.

23 See: Woźniak, *Różnica i tajemnica*.

24 Tillich, "Religious Symbol," 267-268.

The ultimate answer to the question about the symbol's origin is the symbolic nature of reality. Reality itself appears symbolic because it reveals something more than itself. So symbols appear to man, and are not created by him. Their ultimate source is simply the Unconditional which manifests itself through the conditioned. So the problem of the theological theory of knowledge, and in it the question of religious language, ultimately leads to the question of revelation. It can therefore be said that the mediation in knowing God appears not only from below (as a symbol), but also from above (as a revelation). Symbols themselves combine into specific systems in which they relate to each other and condition each other. Such systems are, according to Tillich, myths.<sup>25</sup> Each myth is nothing but a set of symbols arranged in a certain order. And since a symbol is a necessary language of religion, a myth is also necessary. That is why Tillich cuts himself off from Rudolf Bultmann's concept of demythologization and proposes deliteralization instead.<sup>26</sup> The problem, in his opinion, does not lie in the existence of a myth, as it is necessary. The only problem is reading the myth literally, treating it as an objective description of reality. As Kłoczowski notes, commenting on Tillich's thought, it is literalism, and not the myth itself, that is grossly inconsistent with contemporary intellectual sensitivity and culture.<sup>27</sup>

Another issue is the relationship between symbol and theology. It may seem that while colloquial religious language is a symbolic language, the scientific language of academic theology is already a language that literally describes God or the supernatural world. However, as has already been said, no religious language is or can be non-symbolic. Therefore, the language of theology, despite its apparent difference from everyday religious language, is also a symbolic language. It is false to oppose the language of religion and the language of theology. Both of these forms of language are formed by symbols. In the language of theology, they are more rationalized, but they still remain symbols. Jesus, speaking about the sower throwing the seed, is not so far away from the theologian who deals with the question of the relationship between human freedom and God's omnipotence. The language of parables and the language of speculative theology are symbolic languages. Ultimately, the Unconditional cannot be expressed in any human words. Language can only guide you to the Mystery and communicate its presence. After all, every religious language is therefore a myth. Theology is also a myth – its specificity lies in the fact that it is a broken myth.<sup>28</sup>

Tillich introduces the concept of a *broken myth* to emphasize the importance of rationalization in the development of religious language. It is therefore about the transition from religious language in everyday use to the language of theology. Konrad Waloszczyk, writing about Tillich's thoughts, notes that the broken myth

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<sup>25</sup> Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 48–49.

<sup>26</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, II, 152.

<sup>27</sup> Kłoczowski, "Teolog «troski ostatecznej»," 340.

<sup>28</sup> Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 51.

remains a myth, but its mythical character is now clearly exposed.<sup>29</sup> When a literalistic threat is defeated and symbols are consciously used as symbols, the myth is broken. This does not mean that the myth is taken frivolously, as some naive story from the past that can only now be reliably explained. No, the myth remains indispensable and its relevance is not diminished in any way. On the contrary, breaking a myth makes it possible to concentrate on its true message and meaning, instead of discussing its supposed historicity or the literal nature of its elements. Theology is therefore not some eccentric intellectual entertainment for the elite, but a very important element in the process of knowing the Unconditional. On the basis of Tillich's thoughts, it can be said that in cognitive mediation a very important role is played by theology as a rationalized language of thinking and speaking about God.

## 2. The Mediation of Theology in Human Cognition of God

Theology plays an important role in the process of getting to know God. According to the discussed thinker, a theologian is a person endowed with a special gift of the Holy Spirit who carries out his mission in the Church. Thus, this is an understanding of theology not so much of an academic one, but rather of an ecclesial-charismatic one. The task of the theologian is extremely important for the entire community, and the theologian himself is endowed with a special calling.<sup>30</sup> What is theology as such and what are its tasks? Paul Tillich sees theology as a very important mission of the Church, consisting in a well understood apology.<sup>31</sup> According to the Protestant thinker, theology should always be apologetic. Antoni Nadbrzeźny, for example, indicated just such an apologetic shape of theology as defined by Tillich.<sup>32</sup> It is not, however, about a narrow understanding of this phrase, and therefore about a particular theological field, which today is most often referred to as fundamental theology. The point is that theology is a way of answering human questions contained in an existential situation. Theology is therefore the next, already advanced stage of getting to know God. It is not the same as faith, although it is based on it and requires it at the point of departure. While faith is, according to Tillich, a state of ultimate concern, theology is a form of intellectual reflection on this ultimate concern. The task of theology is to draw conclusions from the encounter with ultimate concern. The subject of theology, however, is still the same as that of faith – it is the Unconditional, ultimate concern in an objective sense. Theology, however, is not

<sup>29</sup> Waloszczyk, "O micie rozłamany," 401.

<sup>30</sup> Tillich, *Prawda jest w głębi*, 108–109.

<sup>31</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, 6–8.

<sup>32</sup> Nadbrzeźny, "Koncepcja teologii," 153.

identical with faith as such. Also, philosophy is not, in spite of some similarities, the same thing as theology. Philosophy examines ultimate reality by asking the question about being. Theology, on the other hand, always asks about the final concern, about what is ultimately important for man. For a philosopher, therefore, an objective study of the problem of being is sufficient, while the theologian himself must have the ultimate concern and derive his theology from it.<sup>33</sup> Paul Tillich notes, however, that the philosopher also sometimes shows a final concern and builds his philosophy on it. In this sense, the greatest philosophers have always been implicitly theologians as well.<sup>34</sup> Although they did not use theological language directly, they approached the mystery of being as their ultimate concern.

The philosophical search for the Unconditional often becomes secretly theological. The theologian, on the other hand, cannot avoid being a philosopher as well. Theology cannot ignore ontological issues, especially the matter of ontological difference. Tillich himself has clearly shown through his work that theology is inevitably linked with philosophy. The status of theology is in itself, therefore, mediating. It stands between faith and reason, between philosophy and revelation. Ultimately, it also stands between the knowing subject and the known Unconditional. According to Tillich, the role of theology cannot be overestimated. About how much religious language in his edition of the ordinary can check in daily use, with so much to the creative dialogue with contemporary culture, to justify the faith to today's man, you need a language of theology. Theological knowledge is therefore important not only for the theologian himself, but for the whole Church and its mission. Theology is a certain constitutive stage of getting to know God. As such, it is also of great importance to the idea of mediation present in theological cognition.

In order to better grasp the meaning of theology as an intermediary language in knowing God, it is worth taking a closer look at it. According to Tillich, theology must remain in tension between its two extreme, incorrect visions. The first misconception of theology is supernaturalism. This position sees the subject of theology in some supernatural world, built somehow on the world of everyday human experience. In such a vision God is above the world as some Supreme Being who, having created the world, is then radically separated from it.<sup>35</sup> God can intervene in the world, and sometimes he does. However, these are special external interventions from which God and the world are starkly separate. Supernaturalistic theology deals with the other world, disregarding the world in which man lives. The task of theology is then to show the supernatural world that is overlooked on a daily basis.

<sup>33</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, 6–7.

<sup>34</sup> A theologian in the strict sense, however, is characterized by the fact that by criticizing the state of affairs (the transmission of the faith), he never ceases to represent it. The theologian is as if permanently immersed in the foundation of revelation, even when he critically examines the Bible, dogmas, etc. Tillich, "Religion," 394.

<sup>35</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, II, 6.

According to Tillich, this line of practicing theology is wrong and, especially nowadays, unbelievable.

The existence of some supernatural world and supernatural beings who would mysteriously influence human destiny has been questioned by the twentieth-century mentality. Theology which deals exclusively with the supernatural world understood in this way, in Tillich's opinion, distracts man from his own world and its problems. Therefore, supernaturalistic theology, apart from being philosophically unbelievable, distracts man from his existence. Instead of taking up the problems that people face, theology in this optics sends us back to the illusory beyond. It was precisely this understanding and experiencing of Christianity that Friedrich Nietzsche severely criticized, considering the concept of the afterlife to be particularly inhuman and non-life. According to this philosopher, supernaturalistic Christianity arises as a result of resentment among people who cannot cope with life here and now.<sup>36</sup> Tillich seems to agree with this critique of supernaturalism.<sup>37</sup>

The opposite extreme is naturalism. Generally speaking, this is the view that all reality is limited to the visible world. God is simply present as the world, in some sense he is identical with it. In naturalistic theology, God in no way transcends the world.<sup>38</sup> So it is in the extreme opposite of supernaturalism, in which God only transcends the world. However, Tillich also distances himself from naturalism. According to the eminent theologian, naturalism cannot justify faith as the ultimate concern at all. If God were only the whole of the world, he would not be worthy of unconditional attention. While supernaturalism disregards the world, naturalism overestimates it.

The concept of theology proposed by Tillich is somewhat between supernaturalism and naturalism. It is not, however, a precisely measured middle ground, which would be a compromise between one extreme and the other. The ecstatic concept, as the thinker himself defines it, is a positive and creative vision of understanding God and theology. In the light of this vision, God is present in the world as the creative ground and sense of all being. At the same time, however, the ground and the sense of being infinitely exceed being itself. Therefore, it is an ecstatic concept – God is present in the world, but constantly sends us beyond the world.<sup>39</sup> The resulting concept of theology is analogous. Its task is not to detach from this world and point to the supernatural world hidden from human eyes, which would only be the “real” world. But it is also not to stop at the world of everyday experience and explain it. Theology is always meant to take the world and human life seriously, while

<sup>36</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche (*The Antichrist*, 72) states: “Under Christianity the instincts of the subjugated and the oppressed come to the fore: it is only those who are at the bottom who seek their salvation in it.”

<sup>37</sup> Tillich expressed himself quite flattering about Nietzsche in *The Courage to Be* (p. 30), where he wrote, inter alia, that the philosopher had “the courage to look into the abyss of nonbeing in the complete loneliness of him who accepts the message that «God is dead».”

<sup>38</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, II, 6.

<sup>39</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, II, 7.

pointing towards ultimate fulfillment in the Unconditional. Such a positioning of theology also gives it a specific shape in its formal aspect. One of the most characteristic features of Tillich's theology is perhaps the theological method, which is one of the most widely commented aspects of the thought of the German-American theologian. This method found many continuators and polemicists. It is a theological method of correlation.

The method of correlation is a thoroughly developed and reliably used theological method by Tillich. All *Systematic Theology*, constituting a kind of magnum opus of the author, is built on the key of correlation.<sup>40</sup> So it is not that this method is just a loose proposition by Tillich, which was not fully developed and applied. The method of correlation was actually used by its creator and fully embodied in the form of his philosophical and theological system. Oswald Bayer, discussing the importance of Tillich's theology, notes that the method of correlation determines the shape of the entire work of the author.<sup>41</sup> This method is based on the distinction between two poles essential for theology: the existential situation and the revelation. Every theology stretches between these poles. Each theology relates to human life and tries to illuminate it, each also draws from revelation and acts in its service. The problem is only to establish the right relationship, the appropriate coupling between the existential situation and the revelation.

Supernaturalistic theology is characterized by the fact that it ignores the human situation and focuses solely on the revelation.<sup>42</sup> Such a theology risks a complete detachment from life and a sterile monologue, because without taking into account the recipient's situation, the message becomes dead, even if it is literally faithful to the revelation. On the other hand, the theology of the naturalistic profile commits the exact opposite error – it accentuates the human situation and tries to clarify it, forgetting, however, about the transcendent nature of revelation, which is the source of all theology worthy of that name.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, sound theology ignores neither the vector of the situation nor the revelation.

The theologian's task is to connect existential questions, contained in the human situation, with the answers provided by the revelation. In this sense, theology is based on correlation – it is the correlation of an existential situation and revelation. The theological method is therefore to find questions hidden in human existence and to provide answers to these questions contained in the revelation. That is why theology can never detach itself from the specific context of human life, and at the same time it cannot cease to be faithful to revelation. This revelation is the ultimate source of theology, but an analysis of the revelation itself is not enough. It must

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<sup>40</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, 59–66.

<sup>41</sup> Bayer, "Tillich," 23.

<sup>42</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, 65.

<sup>43</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, 65.

always be confronted and correlated with the life of a specific person. The correlation method itself places theology in an intermediary position. John P. Clayton notes this when he calls his book *The Concept of Correlation*. Apart from the fact that theology mediates the process of getting to know God (this theme will be further developed), theology itself is mediating in its nature – as Karski emphasizes, summarizing Tillich's views.<sup>44</sup> The mediation of theology consists here in linking human existence with revelation. Thus, when discussing the idea of mediation in Tillich's theology, one cannot ignore the problem of theology as mediator itself.

Theology understood in this way clearly differs from ontology or metaphysics. At the same time, however, according to Tillich theology is very closely related to ontology, which has already been emphasized many times. How can one understand the role of theology in relation to the ontological view of the world? It seems that, as in the case of the concept of Being Itself, this relation should be understood ecstatically. The point, then, is that theology cannot avoid ontological categories when describing man and his world. However, they are not binding and exhaustive. Ultimately, theology pushes beyond the world that can be described in terms of metaphysics. In relation to ontology, theology is therefore ecstatic – it contains ontology, but it refers further and deeper. Ontology in itself can only be a conceptual base, auxiliary to theology, but is not its source. The latter is only revelation, the testimony of which is especially the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.<sup>45</sup> Ontology thus appears as the language of theology, but only an introductory language. The final word belongs to revelation, which also answers ontological questions. Theology also mediates between ontology and God's word.

Another issue is the relationship between theology and existentialist thought. It is known that Tillich's theology strongly refers to and is influenced by existentialism. These influences are not hidden by the author himself, who directly takes over a lot of conceptual apparatus from existentialists, especially Martin Heidegger.<sup>46</sup> So how does theology rank in relation to the philosophy of existentialism? In Tillich's view, theology is undoubtedly thoroughly existential. Tillich already sees evidence of such a thesis in the Bible itself. For example, the Book of Ecclesiastes particularly clearly addresses the sensibilities of twentieth-century existentialists and raises questions similar to theirs.<sup>47</sup> It is all about what emerges from the very method of theological correlation – theology affects human existence and is always directed at it. There is no (or shouldn't be) a ready-made theology in itself that could only be secondarily applied to human fate. Like the philosophy of existentialism, theology is deeply touched by the problems of human existence. Theology always remembers

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44 Karski, *Teologia*, 78.

45 Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, 35.

46 Tillich, "The Nature," 403–410.

47 Tillich, *The New Being*, 168.

the drama of existence and everything it says is intended to illuminate this drama. The difference between existentialism and theology, however, is clear. According to Tillich, it consists in the fact that theology does not stop at merely analyzing the existential situation of man. In the 20th century, existentialism was the trend that exposed the mystery of human life and its drama in an unparalleled way.<sup>48</sup> However, it did not give any positive response to this drama. On the contrary, often unable to find this answer, it headed for nihilism and despair. This is what Tillich himself wrote about it: “The threat to spiritual life is not doubt as an element but the total doubt. If the awareness of not having has swallowed the awareness of having, doubt has ceased to be methodological asking and has become existential despair.”<sup>49</sup> This is shown, for example, by the works of such writers as Jean Paul Sartre or Albert Camus.

Theology, on the other hand, provides a real answer to the question posed by existentialism. “Sometimes I have been called an «existential philosopher», or better, an «existential theologian». But there is no such a thing; because existentialism raises the problems of human existence; and theology, in the name of the religious symbols it interprets, tries to give answers, to these questions.”<sup>50</sup> These answers are contained in God’s revelation. Here too, the quasi-mediating role of theology can be seen. It is an intermediary between existentialism and the word of God himself. Only theology can bring the answers of revelation where the question of human existence is seriously asked. Therefore, it performs an extremely important intermediary function for contemporary culture, on which existentialism has left its mark. If in the twentieth century existential questions took on a clearly cultural-intellectual form in the form of existentialism, they demanded an answer also formed in some intellectual form. Theology is such a form. It can therefore be said that theology transcends existentialism towards the Unconditional. Thanks to theology, as Tillich understands it, the question about human life becomes at the same time a question about God. It is theology that binds the world of man and the world of God together, showing that the question of man is the answer of God himself. Existentialism is a very important sign of the times taken up by Tillich in his theology. It seems to be a significant sign especially because it helps to place human existence at the center of theological speculation. At the same time, the anthropocentrism of existentialism is transcended by theology towards theocentricism.

Another point that must be addressed in discussing Tillich’s theology is that of experience. As we know, the problem of experience has acquired great importance in contemporary philosophical and humanistic thought.<sup>51</sup> It also becomes more and

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<sup>48</sup> Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 139–140.

<sup>49</sup> Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 48.

<sup>50</sup> Tillich, “Philosophical Background,” 416.

<sup>51</sup> The fundamental role of experience, especially of historical experience, was pointed out by, for example, Hans-Georg Gadamer. See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

more important for theology.<sup>52</sup> In a sense, theology has always been based on and closely related to the Christian experience. Only today, however, has experience become a key concept in theology itself. Discussions about the role and place of experience in theological research flared up strongly in the time of Tillich, who could not help but address this issue. Paul Tillich focuses his attention on the problem of experience in his main work – *Systematic Theology*. He notes that experience is essential to a theology that cannot exist without being related to it. “The sources of systematic theology can be sources only for one who participates in them, that is, through experience.”<sup>53</sup> Many theologians have even gone so far as to say that experience is the primary source of theology.<sup>54</sup> Attempts were made to place them in a number of so-called *loci theologici*, alongside Scripture, liturgy, Church Fathers, Church teaching and others.<sup>55</sup> In Catholic theology, an important moment in this matter came with the publication of the papal encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*, in which John Paul II refers to the experience of individuals and communities as one of the sources of Mariology.<sup>56</sup>

Tillich’s approach, however, is different. It would seem that such an existential thinker would eagerly place experience as the central theological source. Tillich, however, refuses to do so, arguing that experience is no source of theology at all. If theology had its origin simply in human experience, the answers to human questions would be in the human situation itself. “If experience in this sense is used as the source of systematic theology, nothing can appear in the theological system which transcends the whole of experience.”<sup>57</sup> However, this is not the case, as evidenced by the drama of existentialism. Answers to human questions and existential problems can only come from outside. Of course, the “outside” is a metaphor, which only means that they are not answers derived from existence itself. The answer comes within human existence, but existence itself is not the source of it. Therefore, the source of theology can only be revelation. Tillich is firmly in this position to avoid the dangers of naturalism.<sup>58</sup> Theology has a message to convey that transcends the human situation, comes from outside of it. The role of experience is therefore crucial, but it is not a source. Hence, the role of experience is mediation. It is, moreover, one of the few places in the Tillich system where the theologian explicitly uses the term “mediation.” “Experience is the medium through which the sources «speak» to us, through which we can receive

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52 Kowalik, *Funkcja doświadczenia*, 36–37.

53 Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, 40.

54 Friedrich Schleiermacher is considered to be a typical representative of this way of thinking.

55 Napiórkowski, *Jak uprawiać teologię*, 52.

56 John Paul II argues: “Furthermore, Marian spirituality, like its corresponding devotion, finds a very rich source in the historical experience of individuals and of the various Christian communities present among the different peoples and nations of the world” (*RMat* 48).

57 Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, 43.

58 Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, 65.

them.”<sup>59</sup> The mediation of experience is the transmission of the revelation. Therefore, it is not only a mediation in getting to know God, but also a mediation in the appearance of God himself, and thus a mediation from above.

It can therefore be said that the problem of theology in Tillich’s thought is the problem of mediation, which is at some point suggested by the author himself: “the task of theology is mediation.”<sup>60</sup> It is an intermediary in the process of getting to know God. It is therefore a matter of bottom-up mediation which accompanies the believer in his cognitive journey towards the Unconditional. Theology plays an enormous role in this process of mediating cognition. In the light of Tillich’s thoughts, theology is not merely some academic science that studies Christian doctrine. It is an important element of getting to know God, it is a certain way of knowing very important for the Christian community.<sup>61</sup> Theology mediates between people of a specific epoch, their life situation and God’s unchanging revelation.

It is impossible to talk and think about God without using certain ideas, terms and concepts. Theology is precisely a set and system of them. It is therefore an illusion to break away from theology in the name of some alleged fidelity to the “pure Gospel.” The four Evangelists also had their theologies with which the holy books are imbued. It is impossible to communicate God’s message without practicing theology. It can therefore be said that theology is an indispensable mediator in the process of getting to know God, but also in the process of communicating God’s revelation.<sup>62</sup> The mediation of theology also works in the sphere of teaching in the Church, because it is impossible to teach without any theological elements. The whole theology is therefore not only permeated with the idea of mediation, but also acts as an mediator. So it seems that getting to know God and any communication of this knowledge cannot be done without mediation. Although God is always directly present in human life, the discovery of this immediate presence takes place through the mediation of finite elements of reality that constantly refer to God. So it has to be reiterated that towards the Unconditional one goes through the conditioned. This is confirmed by the everyday language used when talking about religious matters. It is a symbolic language and thus, by its nature, it mediates. The transcendent reality cannot in any way be grasped by human cognition. Man expresses his religious experience only through symbols that not so much define, but rather lead indirectly to the Unconditional. On the other hand, theology, as a more scientific, systematic and coherent language, does not cease to be a symbolic language.

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<sup>59</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, 40.

<sup>60</sup> Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, xii.

<sup>61</sup> For Tillich, theology is an essential function of the mission of the Church, therefore its meaning is discussed in the ecclesiological section of his system. Cf. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, III, 201–204.

<sup>62</sup> While the very presence of God is direct, its communication (theology) is always mediated. Tillich, “Problem of Theological Method,” 307.

### 3. The Importance of Cognitive Mediation

Mediation is not a degree of knowledge, but the only means and a continuous path to getting to know God. In the face of the absolute closeness of God and, at the same time, his incomprehension, one cannot think or say anything about God except indirectly. This is why religious language is essentially an intermediary language. By pointing to the symbol as the essence of this language, Tillich aptly shows that language, on the one hand, can never reach God as some “object,” and on the other hand, it must be used in relation to God, because religious experience requires communication.<sup>63</sup> Since one person wants to tell another about his faith, religious language is necessary and obvious.<sup>64</sup> This language may take the form of colloquial or systematically developed scientific theology. However, it always remains a symbolic language that refers to ultimate reality rather than depicts it. It is in this key that Tillich’s concept of religious language is presented, for example, by Marcin Napadło.<sup>65</sup> Mediation in knowing God is therefore not an artificial creation, but flows, as it were, from the nature of things. It is hard to disagree with Tillich that all knowledge of God is symbolic, that is, indirect. It wonders why Tillich is so reluctant to use the very term “mediation.” In any case, cognitive mediation is the only and inevitable path when it comes to any kind of thinking and discourse about God.

The Creator is known through his works and is identified only by analogy to these works. That is why Tillich writes: “*analogia entis* is in no way able to create a natural theology. It is not a method of discovering truth about God; it is the form in which every knowledge of revelation must be expressed.”<sup>66</sup> Beyond the intermediary path, there is only union and incomprehensible closeness, which are no longer discursive cognition, there are no thoughts, words and ideas in them – there is only presence. Wherever you want to say something about this presence, you immediately enter the realm of mediation.

One may ask, however, why resort to religious language at all. Thinking and talking about God may seem pointless, since man “lives, moves and is” in him (cf. Acts 17:28). Indirectly, the answer is contained in Tillich’s concept of religion. According to Paul Tillich, religion can be understood in two ways.<sup>67</sup> In a narrower sense, it is a certain sphere of life that is devoted to beliefs and beliefs about God or gods. It is the sphere of religious worship and practices, as well as the sphere of a specific ethos and, above all, a myth, i.e. a set of religious beliefs. This is the common sense of the word “religion,” that is how it is most commonly understood. Religion in this narrow sense is simply a particular sphere of life that functions alongside

63 Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, II, 240–241.

64 Walczak, “Bóg osobowy,” 129.

65 Napadło, “Porozumieć się z Bogiem,” 53–86.

66 Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, 131.

67 Tillich, *My Search*, 130–131.

other spheres: personal life, social life, culture, art, politics, economy, sports, and so on. On the other hand, in the broader sense, which, according to Tillich, is more appropriate, religion is not one of the spheres of life, but the ultimate depth and horizon of all its spheres.<sup>68</sup> In this view, religion is a reference to the Unconditional, it is simply faith, or ultimate concern. The state of ultimate anxiety guides a person in all spheres and aspects of his life.<sup>69</sup> By itself, it does not need a separate sphere and a separate language.

The believer seems to shape his whole life according to his faith, so he does not need religion in the narrow sense. However, this is not so because of original sin, that is, in Tillich's language, because of the alienation of existence.<sup>70</sup> By alienating existence, man has been uprooted from his life. The spiritual confusion of the human person makes it impossible for him to spontaneously remain in union with his ultimate concern. A special sphere of life is needed, which, through its signs, will remind man of his ultimate destiny and direct him towards it. Therefore, according to Tillich, religion is needed because of original sin. One can draw the conclusion from reading the work of the theologian that there would not be religion as a particular area of life if it were not for original sin. It is hard to disagree with this seemingly iconoclastic statement. It is precisely the alienation of man that requires him to have a religion, and therefore also a religious language.<sup>71</sup> The mediation in getting to know God is therefore paradoxically due to sin. Where the unity of man with God is steadfast, there is no need to "think of God" or use religious language. Even the very word "God," which, according to Tillich, is a symbol of God,<sup>72</sup> would not be needed. The mediation of creatures would still take place, but would not focus attention in any way on itself. Anything a man would encounter on his way would instantly send him back to the Unconditional. However, since the real human situation is not such a transparency of the world, but fallenness of original sin, the knowledge of God must be mediated and itself mediating. Religious language is necessary, symbols and theology woven from them are also necessary.

Tillich's intuition, pointing to the central role of symbols in religion, also seems to be very relevant today and of great importance. In view of the crisis that the Christian faith encounters in contemporary culture, it is undoubtedly essential to properly explain the meaning of the claims that Christianity proposes. An important sign of today's civilization is, for example, the enormous development of the science

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<sup>68</sup> Karski, *Teologia*, 86.

<sup>69</sup> Tillich shows especially the unity of religion understood in this way with culture and morality. Cf. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, III, 100–102.

<sup>70</sup> Tillich, "Estrangement and Reconciliation," 256–267.

<sup>71</sup> Paul Tillich (*Systematic Theology*, II, 47) states: "Questions and answers, whether positive or negative, already presuppose the loss of a cognitive union with God. He who asks for God is already estranged from God, though not cut off from him."

<sup>72</sup> Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 46.

and its impact on human mentality. The role of explaining the reality that religion used to play is now played by science. It is scientists who are expected to answer questions about the universe, they are asked to explain reality. This is all the more so because science becomes credible through the development of technology that grows out of it. Religion, therefore, left the position of the exegete of the world. Religious masters are no longer expected to respond to the genesis or structure of the cosmos. Many people thus abandon religion altogether, as compromised or possibly out of date. However, understanding religious statements as symbolic, one can conclude that the purpose of religion was never to translate the world. Religion in this sense is not a competitor to science, and myth is not a primitive precursor to cosmology. The task of religion is and has always been to point out the ultimate dimension of reality. The exact sciences, by their very nature, cannot have access to this dimension.

Religion, therefore, does not contradict or dispute with science, but touches on a completely different level. As Michał Heller says, “science gives us Knowledge, and religion gives us Meaning.”<sup>73</sup> Tillich’s concept of mediation helps to situate religion in this way. The language of religion is the language of symbols, and thus it relates man to the ultimate concern that cannot be expressed directly through human concepts and ideas. The problem, however, is a specific descriptive mentality that stubbornly links the category of truth with literality. For such a mentality, the myth is a lie because it does not accurately describe the actual structure of the world. The statements of the religious language are also untrue, because they do not harmonize with the truth about the world revealed by exact sciences. For example, the statement “God created the world” then runs counter to the scientific vision of cosmic evolution. Problems of this kind disappear automatically when one is clearly aware of the symbolic nature of religious language. This is not easy, because the descriptive mentality defends itself by claiming that possibly a symbol may be true in some way, but is always less important than the literal. Tillich himself – as H.D. McDonald reminds – lamented the common saying: “it’s just a symbol.”<sup>74</sup> In fact, it is exactly the opposite of what literalists want – a symbolic utterance expresses much more than a literal utterance can express.

The symbol is therefore not less, but more true than a description of the facts. “A religious symbol is true if it adequately expresses the correlation of some person with final revelation.”<sup>75</sup> The hint from Tillich’s theology is this: do not be afraid of a symbol. Emphasizing the symbolic nature of religious language is extremely important today and can help to avoid many misunderstandings, even leading to the atheization of entire societies. It is worth noting that this symbolic emphasis is

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<sup>73</sup> Heller, “Rzeczy najważniejsze,” 18.

<sup>74</sup> McDonald, “The Symbolic Christology,” 75.

<sup>75</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, 240.

not a liberal retreat, nor is it an attempt to say that the doctrine is not that important and should not be worried about. It is simply the recognition of a truth that has always been present in theology, though often forgotten. Unconditional God cannot be grasped by any human word. All human thoughts, ideas, words, statements, concepts can only point to Him, relate to Him. Language can only be an intermediary, which is why it is always symbolic.

What Tillich says about theology itself also seems very important. The drama of theology is essentially the same – it is the tear between revelation and the life of the person to whom theology is to be directed.<sup>76</sup> The history of theology shows how difficult it is to persevere in this tension. More than once theology began to speak a language that was too human, betraying the revelation and adjusting to the existing human situation. At other times, theology tries so hard to be faithful to the revelation that it forgets to whom it is addressed. Such theology does not take into account the existential situation of man and speaks arbitrarily using a language foreign to the contemporary sensitivity. Then it does not fulfill its role because it is completely incomprehensible to the recipients. The method of correlation is a good solution to this tension. This does not mean, of course, that only Tillich was the first to use this method and that only his theology was faithful to both poles: situation and revelation. The method of correlation has always been used by the great theologians of Christianity, and Tillich's merit is clearly articulating the problem and naming this method.<sup>77</sup> It is an intermediary method because, in its light, theology becomes an intermediary between human life and revelation. The lessons of Tillich's method of correlation are not so much the method itself as a concrete, formal path to building theology, but rather a deep theological principle. The point is that theology must always remain faithful to God and at the same time be faithful to man. According to Karski, the method of correlation also means that the meeting between God and man means something real for both parties.<sup>78</sup>

At the same time, the mediation of theology is not exhausted in its correlation character. Theology is a mediator in itself, it mediates between the seeking man and the God that is found. Therefore, theology is a very important mission in the Church, and not merely something elitist and of little importance. Since religious language is inevitable, it is also inevitable that it develops systematically. Theology therefore has an important task in the Church as a form of articulating its faith. The view of theology as having an intermediary function ensures that its mission is properly set up. The importance of theology is considerable – it is the pinnacle of mediation in the intellectual form of getting to know God.<sup>79</sup> Therefore: “If the medi-

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<sup>76</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, 3.

<sup>77</sup> Tillich, “Problem of Theological Method,” 310–312.

<sup>78</sup> Karski, *Teologia*, 79.

<sup>79</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, III, 201.

ating task of theology is rejected, theology itself is rejected.”<sup>80</sup> Such optics prevent the theologian from seeing his task as something that he does primarily for himself or possibly for some narrow group of interested parties. The theologian’s mission concerns the entire Church. It can be said that the Church demands good theology because it belongs to it.

The most important issue concerning the mediation in knowing God, however, is the question of the legitimacy of mediation. It should be noted that mediation is in dialectical unity with God’s directness. The path from the conditioned to the Unconditional is not a path that leads to the goal at the end. It is a way of getting to know what has always been directly given. The unity of God and man, this marvelous unity witnessed by the event of Jesus, is the starting point for every Christian idea of mediation.<sup>81</sup> Speaking anthropomorphically, it can be said that God does not need mediation, because He has always been a God of immediate proximity. On the other hand, man, in order to become aware of God’s closeness and constantly return to it, needs the mediation of creatures and the mediation of language. It can be seen, therefore, that the thesis that sometimes functions, that mediation is something non-Christian, which was built up on the basis of the originally pure message of the Gospel, is not true. Yes, mediation can be understood in a pagan way, and such an understanding should be fought. On the other hand, orthodox intermediation is something inevitable in the conditions of existence. This is even shown by the theology of Paul Tillich, whose Protestant provenance would seem to indicate a negative attitude towards mediation. However, even Protestant theology cannot do without mediation, even if it itself professes otherwise. It was shown, for example, by Stanisław C. Napiórkowski, who diligently analyzed the Lutheran *Liber Concordiae* in the book *Solus Christus*.<sup>82</sup>

## Conclusion

Summing up, it should be noted that in the light of Paul Tillich’s thoughts, mediation in human cognition of God is simply something obvious and inalienable. At the same time, it does not mean that God is someone distant from man. On the contrary, precisely because of the closeness of God understood, man cannot think and talk about him otherwise than indirectly. In Tillich’s thought, knowing God is ultimately accomplished through symbols. Therefore, religious language is always symbolic, and so is theology itself. The mediation of religious experience also plays an important role in getting to know God. The question about the genesis of the symbols that was raised

<sup>80</sup> Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, xiii.

<sup>81</sup> Tillich calls this unity Godmanhood. Cf. Tillich, “A Reinterpretation,” 310.

<sup>82</sup> Napiórkowski, *Solus Christus*, 173–175.

above ultimately leads to the question about God's revelation. For if symbols are not freely created by people, but somehow come to them by themselves, it means that they are the fruit of an encounter with the Unconditional. It is God himself who is the source of the human religious language in the sense that he inspires it. Symbolism is therefore not some extravagant way of reading reality that only accompanies poets or mystics. Reality as such ultimately has a symbolic dimension, that is, referring beyond itself. The mediation in knowing God has its source, therefore, in the very structure of being through which God mediates himself for man. The knowledge of God is not based on any human ideas, but on God's revelation. The unconditional God, in revealing himself, does nothing but mediate himself in conditioned reality.

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THE MEDIATION IN THE HUMAN COGNITION OF GOD IN THE THOUGHT OF PAUL TILlich

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