Abstract of “A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman”

[15 April 1955]
[Boston, Mass.]

A. Statement of Problem

The problem of this dissertation was to compare and evaluate the conceptions of God in the thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman.

The concept of God was chosen because of the central place which it occupies in any religion; and because of the ever-present need to interpret and clarify the God-concept. Tillich and Wieman were chosen because they represent different types of theology; and because each of them, in the last few years, has had an increasing influence upon theological and philosophical thought.

B. The Methods of Procedure

Several methods of procedure were employed in the investigation of the problem stated for this dissertation. First, the expository method was used. In this method the investigator sought to give a comprehensive and sympathetic exposition of the conceptions of God held by Wieman and Tillich. Second, the comparative method was employed. Here the thought of Wieman and Tillich was brought together with a view to determining their convergent and divergent points. Third, the critical method was employed. The investigator sought to give a critical evaluation of the conceptions of God held by Wieman and Tillich. In seeking to give this critical appraisal, two norms were employed: (i) adequacy in expressing the religious values of historic Christianity; and (ii) adequacy in meeting the requirements of consistency and coherence.

It was necessary to begin the study with a discussion of the methodologies of Tillich and Wieman, since the question of method is of such vital importance in theological and philosophical construction.

Throughout his theology Tillich undertakes the difficult task of setting forth a systematic theology which is at the same time an apologetic. The method used to effect this apologetic task is the “method of correlation.” This method shows the interdependence between the ultimate questions to which philosophy is driven and the answers given in the Christian message. In this method question and answer determine each other. Philosophy and theology are not separated, and they are not identical, but they are correlated.

The method which Wieman employs is the “scientific method.” He contends that this is the only method by which truth can be obtained, whether in the field of common sense, science, philosophy, or religion. The scientific method is defined as the method in which sensory observation, experimental behavior, and rational inference are working together. The methodologies of
Tillich and Wieman are quite antithetical at many points. Wieman’s scientific method is basically naturalistic. Tillich’s method of correlation seeks to overcome the conflict between the naturalistic and supernaturalistic methods.

It was necessary to begin the exposition of Tillich’s conception of God with a discussion of his ontology as a whole, since it is his ultimate conviction that God is “being-itself.” It was also necessary to include a section on Wieman’s theory of value in the exposition of his conception of God, since he holds that God is supreme value and supreme source of value.

C. Conclusions

The following theses may be stated as conclusions drawn from this investigation of the conceptions of God in the thinking of Tillich and Wieman.

1. Tillich’s basic and most persistent definition of God is “being-itself,” esse ipsum. In affirming that God is being-itself, Tillich is denying that God is a being beside other beings. In this conception he intends to convey the idea of power of being. God is the power of being in everything and above everything.

2. Wieman’s basic definition of God is the “creative event.” This definition is an amplification of what Wieman means when he speaks of God as growth. He further defines God as “supreme value” and as “the unlimited connective growth of value-connections.” But these definitions seem to have three different meanings. When Wieman characterizes God as “supreme value” he seems to mean the ideal of perfection or of the achievement of maximum value. When he speaks of God as “the unlimited connective growth of value-connections” he seems to mean the human and social processes which aim at the achievement of value. When he describes God as the creative event he seems to mean the natural forces underlying the achievement of value. These three meanings cannot be viewed as constituting a unity except in a highly figurative sense, and positively not for a consistently empirical religious philosophy. At this point Wieman has failed to be consistently empirical.

3. Both Tillich and Wieman agree that God is an undeniable reality. They are so convinced of the reality of God that they would dismiss all arguments for his existence as futile and invalid. They further agree in seeking to assure the reality of God through the definition of God. But in attempting to formulate the idea of God so as to make the question of his existence a dead issue, Tillich and Wieman have given up much that is most essential from the religious point of view in the idea of God. Both sacrifice too much for the sake of getting rid of a troublesome question.

4. Both Tillich and Wieman deny the category of personality to God. They think that to refer to God as a person is to limit him. This denial of personality to God does not mean, they insist, that God is impersonal. Instead of being impersonal or sub-personal, God is supra-personal. Despite their warnings that God is not less than personal, however, we have seen traits throughout their thinking that point to a God that is less than personal. Wieman’s God is an interaction, that is, a behavior-process. He is not a concrete object or a continuing entity. In short, he is an unconscious process devoid of any true purpose. Tillich’s “being-itself” is little more than a sub-personal reservoir of
power. In this respect Tillich's thought is somewhat akin to the impersonalism of Oriental Vedantism. "Being-itself" is a pure absolute, devoid of consciousness and life.

5. Wieman's naturalistic position causes him to place great emphasis on the immanence of God. Like everything else that exists, God is found within the natural order. Whatever transcendence God has is seen to arise out of his very immanence in the world of events. There is much in Tillich's view that comes close to the naturalistic position. He revolts against the view that there is a world behind the world. The Divine does not inhabit a transcendent world above nature; it is found in the "ecstatic" character of this world as its transcendent depth and ground.

6. Tillich's desire to protect the majesty of God and his complex ontological analysis cause him to stress the transcendence of God as much as his immanence. He finds a basis for God's transcendence in the conception of God as abyss. There is a basic inconsistency in Tillich's thought at this point. On the one hand he speaks as a religious naturalist making God wholly immanent in nature. On the other hand he speaks as an extreme supernaturalist making God almost comparable to the Barthian "wholly other."

7. Tillich and Wieman have at the forefront of their thinking a deep theocentric concern. Both are convinced that God is the most significant Fact in the universe. This theocentric concern leads Tillich and Wieman to the further assertion that God is not man. They see a qualitative difference between God and man.

8. Tillich and Wieman are at one in rejecting the traditional formulations of the attributes of God. Tillich goes beyond Wieman, however, by seeking to set forth the qualitative and symbolic meaning of the attributes.

9. Tillich includes within the divine life both temporality and eternality. Wieman's stress is on the temporality of God. His failure to emphasize the factor of permanence in the idea of God weakens Wieman's doctrine of God at many points. It leaves a God who is the increaser of value without being the conservator of value. In such a situation, value-experience becomes meaningless.

10. The most important words in Tillich's conception of God are "power" and "being." The most important words in Wieman's conception of God are "goodness" and "value." Wieman's basic emphasis is axiological while Tillich's is ontological. Both Wieman and Tillich are partially correct in what they affirm, but partially wrong in what they deny. Both overstate one aspect of the divine nature to the neglect of another basic aspect. Tillich places an undue emphasis on being to the neglect of value; Wieman places an undue emphasis on value to the neglect of being. A more adequate view is to maintain that both value and being are basic in the meaning of God; each blending with the other neither being reduced to the other.

11. Both Tillich and Wieman reject the traditional doctrine of creation. For neither of them is there a super-natural being before and above all beings as their creator.

12. Tillich and Wieman are finitistic theists. However, they differ in one significant respect: in Wieman's conception the limitation to God's power is external to his nature, while in Tillich's thought the limitation is an aspect within God's nature.

13. Wieman holds to an ultimate pluralism, both quantitative and qualit-
18 Apr 1955

tive. Tillich, on the other hand, holds to an ultimate monism, both qualitative and quantitative. Both of these views have been found to be inadequate. Wierman's ultimate pluralism fails to satisfy the rational demand for unity. Tillich's ultimate monism swallows up finite individuality in the unity of being. A more adequate view is to hold a quantitative pluralism and a qualitative monism. In this way both oneness and manyness are preserved.

PD. MLKP-MBU: Box 2.

From Samuel D. Proctor

18 April 1955
Richmond, Va.

Proctor confirms his plan to preach at Dexter's Spring Lecture Series.

Rev. M. L. King, Jr.
309 South Jackson Street
Montgomery, Alabama

Dear Rev. King:

I am expecting to be with you on the 27th, 28th, and 29th of April. I will be coming to Montgomery from Baton Rouge, Louisiana and it is impossible now to give the exact travel plans. There is a direct airline connection which makes it simple, but I have not bothered to get reservations from this far away.

Best wishes on your final examinations for your degree. As we say in Virginia, I am “tickled to death” over this.

Best regards,
[signed] Samuel D. Proctor
School of Religion
SDP: mem

TLSr. MLKP-MBU: Box 117.

From H. Edward Whitaker

19 April 1955
Niagara Falls, N.Y.

Whitaker notes that his church program has "involved people of all the races and nationalities and faiths" and invites King to visit. He also mentions his discussion of King's "Recommendations" for Dexter's governance with Sandy Ray, a friend of King, Sr.