

Topic 9: Faith as a Dimension of the Human

“Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen. Hebrews” (11.1) Faith is being grasped by ultimate concern. Paul Tillich, Dynamics of Faith

I. Faith as a Universal Human Phenomenon: A transcendental analysis of the dynamics of faith appeals to common human experience and discovers that faith is a universal human phenomenon. In the face of mystery and the fact that certain fundamental and universal existential questions do not admit of empirically verifiable answers, humans cannot but live from some type of "faith."

II. The conception of human experience that frames this assertion includes several elements: Human existence consists in freedom. This substantive freedom is synonymous with the human spirit and characterizes the human as distinct from other kinds of beings. But human freedom must "pass into act" in order to be actualized.

The actualization of freedom carries within itself the necessity of faith. This can be seen positively in the human desire for the good, the true, and the beautiful. It shows up starkly in negative experiences of contrast (Schillebeeckx), experiences of unjust suffering or evil, which point with utter clarity to a situation or event that "should not be" and, by contrast, reveal the positive values that "should be."

No finite object can supply what is demanded by the logic of human action. When we recognize that even the totality of this world's goods cannot satisfy our longings, a further contrast appears between the finitude of all human action and the infinity toward which human action tends as the ultimate ground of meaning.

From a concrete, existential, and historical point of view, we see that all human beings live according to some form of faith. This does not mean that we have yet found an object worthy of our faith or even that our faith is conscious and explicit. But some object of faith is always operative insofar as we continue to act as humans.

III. The Apologetic Value of Proposing that All Persons Live According to Some Faith: This shared human experience serves as a starting point for meaningful conversation between the Christian believer and any other person or group. It addresses the suspicion that faith requires the sacrifice of freedom (autonomy) and the subjugation of reason to some alien or imaginary set of values (heteronomy). God's will and human freedom exist in direct (not inverse)

proportion to one another.

IV. Toward a "Definition" of Faith:

- Faith can be defined as "the state of being ultimately concerned" and "an act of a finite being who is grasped by and turned to the infinite" (Tillich). As a universal human experience, faith entails an awareness of and loyalty to a transcendent reality.
- Faith consists in a dynamic commitment of the whole of human freedom in action. Faith is real only insofar as it is an actual human reaction and response to reality.
- Faith is central to one's life because it emerges from the core of one's freedom. Faith is centering because it integrates all the aspects of one's personal reality.
- Faith entails a "being acted upon" and a submission to the transcendent object of faith (passive dimension) and a fidelity and loyalty to that object (active dimension).
- Faith is real and humanizing only when its object is absolutely transcendent. Likewise, if a theological assertion does not involve transcendent mystery, it is not a statement of genuine religious faith nor an authentic theological assertion.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. In what way has faith shown itself to you as a universal human phenomenon?
2. Do you agree with Tillich's definition of faith?
3. How is faith central to your life?