

## ФІЛОСОФІЯ РЕЛІГІЇ

UDC 141.32

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### PROTESTANT EXISTENTIALISM AND THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF RELIGION

**Topic.** *There are two common approaches to critiquing religion. The first is closely related to atheism, agnosticism, and skepticism. The second stems from the core of religion itself and is known as the theological critique of religion. This critique, framed within the popular philosophical and religious trend of the early 20th century known as Protestant existentialism, is particularly insightful. Its main representatives included Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, among others. Although Protestant existentialism was not a homogeneous movement, the critique of religion was a theme that unified all its proponents.*

**Aim.** *In this paper, the critique of religion is analyzed through historical and philosophical perspectives. Special emphasis is placed on Protestant existentialists, who are considered some of the most insightful critics of religion from within.*

**Methodology.** *Protestant existentialists have not offered a comprehensive theological critique of religion, which necessitates an analysis of their various and dispersed writings. This survey starts with two key points: First, we support the concept of “Protestant Existentialism”, highlighting that this movement began with Søren Kierkegaard and was later developed by his followers, such as Rudolf Bultmann, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Emil Brunner, Friedrich Gogarten, Richard Niebuhr, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Second, we contend that notable Protestant existentialists have critiqued religion in multiple ways, not solely from a biblical standpoint.*

**Results.** *For Tillich, the critique of religion highlighted five main issues: a lack of a critical approach, which involves questioning within religion; an over-reliance on rationalist apologetics; religion's claim to authority on matters of natural science and history; a tendency towards literalism; and a disregard for the concept of risk in theology. Tillich pointed to the fundamentalism seen in various European and American Christian movements as historical examples that illustrated these problematic approaches. Karl Barth offered a striking theological critique of religion, which contrasts with Paul Tillich's approach due to Barth's more biblical foundation. He questioned the validity of morality, religiosity, and humanity's capacity for divine knowledge. For Barth, a genuine experience of God arises not from human understanding, but from the transcendent. This continuous tension between God and humanity, the secular world and the kingdom of God, as well as between religion and faith, characterizes his dialectical method in theology.*

**Key words:** *theological critique of religion, protestant existentialism, fundamentalism, anthropocentrism, literalism.*

**Introduction.** The term “critique of religion” refers to a variety of intellectual movements worldwide that argue religion is built on non-rational, superstitious, primitive, and unfounded beliefs. Philosophical systems such as “The New Atheism”, “The Brights Movement”, and “Atheists United” are examples of this critique. These movements challenge the core aspects of religion – metaphysical, ethical, and historical. According to the prominent thinkers within these groups, religion is nothing more than a collection of ancient superstitions that taint every facet of social life. They argue that religion is fundamentally incompatible with

a rational, moral, and self-assured existence. As Christopher Hitchens puts it, “religion poisons everything. As well as being a menace to civilization, it has threatened human survival” [4, p. 25].

There is another aspect of religious critique known as theological critique. While the first type can be referred to as the outward dimension of religious critique, the theological critique represents the inward dimension, primarily because theology arises from religion itself. Therefore, the idea of a theological critique of religion needs to be examined with as much attention to its complexity and peculiarities as one would give to atheistic critique.

**The purpose of the study.** In this paper, we will focus on theological critique of religion in the light of historical and philosophical analysis. Special focus will be on the Protestant existentialists, who are considered as the sharpest critics of religion from within.

**Method of research.** Given that protestant existentialists made no systematic presentation of theological critique of religion, we will be required to search for and uncover it in their scattered writings. Exploring various philosophical and religious issues inevitably broadens and transforms the nature of our inquiry and its assumptions. This survey is no exception, as it begins with two key points: First, we advocate for the concept of “Protestant Existentialism”, emphasizing that this movement originated with Søren Kierkegaard and was later developed by his followers, including Rudolf Bultmann, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Emil Brunner, Friedrich Gogarten, Richard Niebuhr, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Second, we argue that prominent Protestant existentialists have critiqued religion in various ways, not solely from a biblical perspective. Since the article has a limited scope, we intend to explore the theological critique of religion as articulated by Paul Tillich and Karl Barth.

**Results and discussion.** Before we examine the Protestant existentialist critique of religion, it is essential to briefly discuss and clarify the concept of theological critique. This critique fundamentally revolves around the pursuit of authentic faith and serves to highlight the shortcomings in certain approaches to theology, worship, and practice. Moreover, theological critiques of religion include an emotional aspect, urging both believers and religious leaders to repent. There is also a rational aspect represented by apologetics within these critiques. The final point refers to the authentic doctrine, highlighting inconsistencies, inaccuracies, and errors within the teachings of certain denominations.

The theme of theological critique of religion has received significantly more attention since 2010, when several monographs were published in both German and English. Here we appeal to Michael Weinrich’s “Religion und Religionskritik” [7], “Theology against Religion Constructive Dialogues with Bonhoeffer and Barth” by Tom Greggs [3]. Also, there is a paper appeared in a companion “Religion in Europa heute: Sozialwissenschaftliche, rechtswissenschaftliche und hermeneutisch-religionsphilosophische Perspektiven” by acclaimed scholar Christian Danz called “Theologie als Religionskritik. Zum Kritikpotential der Religion” [2]. However, there seems to have been no significant attempt to perceive the term “Theological critique of religion” as the trend within Christian intellectual circles, particularly from a Protestant existentialism perspective. The present paper hopes to fill this gap.

Distinguished Protestant existentialist Paul Tillich, in his article titled “Religion and its Intellectual Critics”, classifies two types of religious critique: intellectual and religious. The first type is associated with debunking the foundations of religion, while the second focuses on revealing the flaws within traditional religious systems. According to Tillich, religious critique identifies distortions in the priestly tradition within a historical context. He distinguishes two main sources of this critique: the biblical prophets and the Protestant reformers. The biblical prophets aimed to differentiate between truth and falsehood in religion. In contrast, the theological critiques of the reformers targeted hierarchical distortions within the Roman Catholic Church [5, p. 389].

Not limited only to the classification of the theological trend of religion critique, Tillich gives a clear explanation of his option as well. Consider the following. First, he emphasizes that, as beings created in the image of God, humans possess the rational ability to question everything they encounter, including matters of faith. Unlike, fundamentalist and conservative circles, Tillich points

out that criticism is compatible with religion. He pays attention, to criticism as a religious necessity, leading to a free and open religion. Similar to Martin Heidegger, Tillich emphasizes the importance of the element of asking (Fragen) as a crucial feature of human beings. Second, unlike the majority of Christian apologists, Tillich, downplays the methodology of rational apologetics, arguing that religion cannot compete with factual statements about history and nature alongside science. Tillich points out that way leads to intellectual dishonesty because religion doesn't belong to the dimension of natural sciences [5, p. 392].

Third, Tillich argues that religion is often reduced to a series of statements that resemble discussions about the finite world of time and space. According to Tillich, the question about God's existence cannot be limited by whatever it may be. Since God transcends both time and space, Tillich considers the inquiry into His existence to be blasphemous. Additionally, he asserts that the realm of religion does not align perfectly with the divine realm, as religion experiences God, truth, and revelation within the constraints of time and space [5, p. 393].

Fourth, Tillich criticizes religious literalism, which he argues persists in the minds of some educated people. He states, "people who know the difference between the objective world of time and space and the meaning of religion sin against religion if they take its symbols literally because they provoke, inescapably, the questioning mind of the intellectual, its criticism, its skepticism, and its radical wrath". As in his other works, Tillich asserts that religion must rediscover that all theological concepts are symbolic. It is important to note a well-known claim by Tillich: "Symbolic doesn't mean unreal". From his perspective, symbolic representations can be more real than anything confined to time and space. Additionally, he believes that intellectual criticism cannot undermine these symbols, nor can intellectual defense uphold them. Interestingly, Tillich acknowledges that this idea also applies to Biblical symbols, which may seem absurd and blasphemous when taken literally but serve as adequate expressions of truth when understood symbolically [5, p. 393].

Fifth, Tillich's challenge to dogmatism is closely related to his concept of risk in theology. He believes that theology must confront the verification problem because religion inherently involves risk. Verification in the realm of religion is not akin to the verification of a physical experiment rather, it pertains to the verification of life's risks. Drawing from the New Testament, Tillich asserts that risk is an existential force, often accompanied by a lack of justified knowledge. The verification of religious spirit and power, as described in the New Testament, serves as a pragmatic element of risk, countering any form of dogmatic absolutism [5, p. 393].

As previously mentioned, Tillich is an open-minded thinker who advocates for a synthesis of religious and intellectual attitude. For this reason, he asserts, "The theologian is both an intellectual critic and a representative of what he criticizes" [5, p. 394]. In summation, Tillich makes a perplexing point concerning church congregations, wishing to remove intellectuals from public impact and the permission to ask the radical question. Furthermore, Tillich claims, that every religion which cannot stand ultimately the radical question which is asked by the intellectual critic of religion is superstition.

One important point deserves special attention here. After arriving in the U.S., Tillich encountered fundamentalist circles that represented a significant and mainstream segment of the American religious landscape. The implications of this interaction are evident in Tillich's Magnum Opus, "Systematic Theology". Tillich offers a critical evaluation of the fundamentalist attitude, suggesting that religious individuals adopt a fundamentalist worldview to shield themselves from the constant change and upheaval in their communities. According to Tillich, in their fear of missing out on eternal truth, they often identify it with previous theological works, along with traditional concepts and solutions, attempting to impose these on new and different situations. This leads to a confusion between eternal truth and its temporal expressions. In Europe, this type of religious attitude is represented by European theological orthodoxy, which in America is known as fundamentalism. When fundamentalism combines with an anti-theological bias, as seen in its biblicist-evangelical form, it defends the theological truths of the past as unchangeable messages against the theological truths of today and tomorrow.

Tillich argues that fundamentalism fails to engage with the present situation, not because it speaks from a timeless perspective but because it is rooted in past issues. It mistakenly elevates something finite and transitory to a status of infinite and eternal validity [6, p. 3].

Karl Barth is another great example of a critical theologian whom we intend to label a Protestant existentialist. In his acclaimed “Der Römerbrief”, he depicted a desperately sharp critique of religion. For this reason, we place Barth as the greatest theological critic of religion within the movement of Protestant existentialism. Undoubtedly, this trend has not been homogenous by ideas, methodology, and even denominational identity. Nevertheless, we can trace the common point to all of those thinkers, namely, critique of religion from within.

According to Barth, human possibility, as a historical phenomenon and reality, is inherently tied to the law and intertwined with the human experience. This intertwining, encompassing its asserted content as well as its underlying psychological, intellectual, moral, and sociological aspects, represents the old world, shadowed by sin and death. The divine possibility of religion, however, never translates into a human possibility. In this context, criticisms of religion hold a degree of truth. While the relationship with God necessarily involves a subjective aspect, this subjectivity is also governed by the law of death in an equally essential way [1, p. 165].

Moreover, Barth emphasizes that religion, in any visible, understandable, and historical context, must be recognized as an event occurring within the realm of humanity, which is marked by sin and death. While religion may deserve attention and admiration in this world, it is crucial to acknowledge that any assertion of its absoluteness, transcendence, or immediacy is not valid [1, p. 165].

In “Der Römerbrief”, we are continually reminded of the significant gap that exists between God and humanity. With prophetic zeal, Barth asserts that the kingdom of God – where God’s lordship and authority prevail – represents a new world. We stand at the threshold of this new world as transformed individuals [7, p. 165].

Given Barth’s appraisal of religion, it is no wonder he was labeled a dialectical theologian. In this context, the following remark by noted German academic Michael Weinrich seems justified: “The crisis of European culture, marked by the First World War, was primarily a crisis of idealistic philosophy and its optimistic views on progress celebrated within the human spirit. The connection between the understanding of religion and this idealistic spirit inevitably drew religion into a tumultuous period of significant upheaval. In this context, religion is perceived as a human concern that is not necessarily aligned with the reality of God. The assumption that humans can seamlessly refer to the divine presence in their history is fundamentally challenged. Knowledge of God is separated from its anthropological interpretations. Conversely, human piety – and therefore religion – now comes under critical scrutiny due to the newly affirmed sovereignty of the God as revealed in the Bible (dialectical theology)” [7, p. 263].

Further, Weinrich defines Two lines of theological criticism of religion. One assigns theology the task of countering the incessant religious self-immunization of man and the church by constantly listening anew to the Word of God testified to by the Bible, to keep man’s religious existence in motion by constantly reaffirming the Word of God and thus to protect it from hopeless religious stagnation. According to Weinrich, this is the view expressed in particular by Karl Barth. The other line tries to go one step further by believing that theological existence can be completely detached from religion as a mere historical garment. The impetus in this direction came from some remarks by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, which were then taken further and finally found their most radical expression in the “Death of God theology”. It may initially remain open whether the second line represents a radicalization compared to the first or rather a moderation in the direction of the anthropocentrism that has just been overcome [7, p. 263].

**Conclusions.** We have explored some theological critiques of religion in the writings of Paul Tillich and Karl Barth. It is important to present these critiques in the following order:

1. Both Tillich and Barth argue that localized religion ultimately leads to literalism, moralism, and a theology of self-salvation through ethical and religious practices such as piety, humility,



and obedience. They contend that this approach to religion undermines genuine faith, which is characterized by risk-taking, openness to the transcendent, questioning, and critical thinking.

2. In fundamentalist circles, Tillich points out that literalism, dogmatic thinking, claims of scientific validity, and a belief in the unlimited potential of rationalist apologetics prevail.

3. For Karl Barth, the most significant danger lies in the assertion of religion as an entity in itself. He argues that this perspective creates an unbridgeable gap between the transcendent God and humanity. Therefore, he believes that religion must be criticized from within to restore its authentic foundations.

Tillich and Barth laid the foundation for two distinct strands of theological criticism of religion. The first strand contributed to the development of radical theology in the 1960s, while the second continued to evolve until the end of the twentieth century. The differences between these strands lie in their foundational premises and methodologies. Tillich's symbolic approach is notably more open to the Christian tradition and encourages dialogue between religion and science, as well as between religion and culture. In contrast, Barth's biblical-hermeneutic method is more localized in its focus. The most original continuator of the theological critique of religion was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Drawing in part on the ideas of Tillich and Barth, he introduced a new perspective known as "religionless Christianity".

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## ПРОТЕСТАНТСЬКИЙ ЕКЗИСТЕНЦІАЛІЗМ І ТЕОЛОГІЧНА КРИТИКА РЕЛІГІЇ

**Актуальність проблеми.** Існує два поширені підходи до критики релігії. Перший тісно пов'язаний з атеїзмом, агностицизмом і скептицизмом. Другий випливає з суті самої релігії і відомий як теологічна критика релігії. Ця критика, сформульована в рамках популярної філософсько-релігійної течії початку 20-го століття, відомої як протестантський екзистенціалізм, є особливо проникливою. Його головними представниками були Пауль Тілліх, Карл Барт, Рудольф Бультман, Дітріх Бонхеффер та інші. Хоча протестантський екзистенціалізм не був однорідною течією, критика релігії була темою, яка об'єднувала всіх його прихильників.

**Мета.** У цій статті критика релігії аналізується з історичної та філософської точок зору. Особлива увага приділяється протестантським екзистенціалістам, які вважаються одними з найбільш проникливих критиків релігії зсередини.

**Методологія.** Протестантські екзистенціалісти не запропонували всебічної богословської критики релігії, що зумовлює необхідність аналізу їх розрізнених праць. Цей огляд починається з двох ключових моментів: По-перше, ми підтримуємо концепцію «протестантського екзистенціалізму», підкреслюючи, що цей рух розпочався з Сьорена К'єркегора і пізніше був розвинутий його послідовниками, такими як Рудольф Бультман, Карл Барт, Пауль Тілліх, Еміль Бруннер, Фрідріх Гогартен, Ріхард Нібур і Дітріх Бонхеффер. По-друге, ми стверджуємо, що видатні протестантські екзистенціалісти критикували релігію в різний спосіб, а не лише з біблійної точки зору. У статті, враховуючи її обмежений обсяг, розглядаються підходи до теологічної критики релігії, розроблені Паулем Тілліхом і Карлом Бартом.

**Результати дослідження.** Для Пауля Тілліха критика релігії висвітлювала п'ять основних проблем: брак критичного підходу, який передбачає сумніви всередині релігії; надмірне покладання на раціоналістичну апологетику; претензії релігії на авторитет у питаннях природничих наук та історії; тенденція до буквалізму; ігнорування концепції ризику в теології. Тілліх вказав на фундаменталізм у різних європейських та американських християнських рухах як на історичні приклади, що ілюструють ці проблемні підходи. Карл Барт запропонував вражаючу теологічну критику релігії, яка контрастує з підходом Пауля Тілліха завдяки більш біблійному фундаменту першого. Барт ставив під сумнів обґрунтованість моралі, релігійності та здатності людини до божественного пізнання. Для Барта справжній досвід Богопізнання походить не з антропологічного, а з трансцендентного джерела. Ця постійна напруга між Богом і людством, світом і Царством Божим, а також між релігією і вірою характеризує його діалектичний теологічний метод.

**Ключові слова:** теологічна критика релігії, протестантський екзистенціалізм, фундаменталізм, антропоцентризм, буквалізм.