

Method of correlation and ecclesiological understanding. Developments from Paul Tillich's theological method.

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Abstract

In order to have a proper theological understanding of many ecclesiological themes, we need a method able to interpret the complex identity of the church as constituted on one side by a divine and spiritual dimension, and on the other side by human and visible elements. The aim of this paper is to sketch a development of Tillich's method of the correlation between human questions and divine answers so that it could be useful for ecclesiology. In the light of this development, the origin of the divine and human church appears to be the claim of the gospel insofar it is the outcome of a process of ecclesial correlation in which the power of the Spirit as divine answer is bounded together with the questions of the Christian community. This understanding of the origin of the church could improve our theological interpretation of many ecclesiological issues, such as the local character of the Christian community.

1. Introduction

Paul Tillich was one of the greatest theologians in the twentieth century and his influence on contemporary Christian theology has been widely acknowledged.¹ His philosophical and theological insight allowed him to point out an interaction between the human historical condition, interpreted in the light of existentialist philosophy, and an ontological understanding of the transcendent self-revelation of God as Being itself. The fundamental conflict between essence and existence, namely, between the realm of perfect being and the fragmentary reality of the human condition, finds theological fulfillment in Tillich's view of revelation: the existential treatment of non-being, typical of the finite worldly condition, is potentially overcome through the free self-communication of God as Being

1 "In *A Directory of Systematic Theologians in North America*, Paul Tillich is cited as mentor more often than any other theologian". See GABRIEL FACKRE, *The Doctrine of Revelation. A Narrative Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), p. 67.

itself² in the Christological paradox of Jesus as the Messiah.³

According to some scholars' opinions, Tillich's method has been developed by this author in perspectives not always in line with classical Christian doctrines grounded in biblical texts and traditional sources.⁴ Actually, his efforts to renew theological vocabulary, thus making it both more comprehensible to the modern world and more congruent with God's transcendence, has produced an image of his religious thought quite different from the usual theological perspective. Particularly important here is the main exposition of his method, namely, the rigorous connection between human questions philosophically interpreted and the corresponding theological answers, even if those answers are always transcendent because they are not deducible from the correlated questions. This method has sometimes brought him to reduce the range of revelation's understanding to the limits of human existential expectations, and

2 See PAUL TILlich, *Systematic Theology. Vol. 1. Reason and Revelation. Being and God* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 235.

3 See PAUL TILlich, *Systematic Theology. Vol. 2. Existence and the Christ* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 125 ff.

4 See GABRIEL FACKRE, *The Doctrine of Revelation, A Narrative Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), p. 83 ff. This critic is especially concerned with the second and the third volume of the *Systematic Theology*, namely, not with the method, but with the theological contents. After the publication of the first volume of *Systematic Theology*, Reinhold Niebuhr wrote that "Tillich's greatness lies in his exploration of the boundary between metaphysics and theology. The difficult task of 'walking the tight-rope' is not negotiated without the peril of losing one's balance and falling over on one side or the other. If Barth refuses to approach the vicinity of the fence because he doesn't trust his balance, Tillich performs upon it with the greatest virtuosity, but not without occasional fall" (REINHOLD NIEBUHR, 'Biblical thought and ontological speculation', in Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (eds.), *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961), p. 226-227). Also George Tavard was initially convinced that the content of the first volume of *Systematic Theology* could be reconciled with the faith of the Church; but after the publication of the second volume he became very critical of Tillich's system, especially of his Christological doctrine. On the relation between Tillich's theology and the Christian sources, Tavard wrote that "it would be difficult to discover a systematic theology that appeals less top the historical sources of Christian doctrine than that of Tillich" (GEORGE H. TAVARD, *Paul Tillich and the Christian Message* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), p. 51).

furthermore to derive some specific conclusions that are not always cogent.⁵

On the other hand, if God's revelation pertains to human beings, it must be possible and necessary to interpret it in a meaningful way so that it could be perceived as 'good news', as a significant offering of definitive salvation, and the starting point of every human interpretation is nothing more than human questions. The valuable insight of Paul Tillich's theological method, in line with many other existential thinkers, is that human life is not just a matter of essence but also of existence, and that it is precisely in this historical and fragmented reality that the self-revelation of the eternal God must be interpreted and proclaimed. For this reason, apart from the specifically debatable contents of his theological system, his method has been developed in many directions and has become one of the starting points of various contemporary theologies.⁶ If the challenge of every Christian thought system in every time and place is to correlate the dialectical understanding of God's transcendence with the analogical imagination of God as self-revealed in creation, in history and definitively in Jesus Christ, then Paul Tillich has certainly accepted the challenge.

The aim of this paper is to sketch a development of Tillich's method so that it could be useful for ecclesiology. The hypothesis will verify that his method of correlation might be conveniently reinterpreted and developed through the integration of an ecclesiological topic, and that at the same time, this improved understanding of this method might suggest some important insights concerning the theological conception of the church.

That a correlative imagination is needed in ecclesiology, although perhaps different from Tillich's, is stated also by G. Tavad:

[The] principle that is at work in the birthing and shaping of the church (...) may be labeled a principle of correlation, though not in Paul Tillich's sense of the expression. Tillich (1886-1965) grounded his *Systematic Theology* in a correlation between human or philosophical question and divine or theological answers. The ecclesial correlation that

5 For instance, his Christology seems to be adoptionistic: see PAUL TILlich, *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 2, p. 147-150.

6 See GABRIEL FACKRE, *The Doctrine of Revelation, A Narrative Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), p. 89 ff.

I have in mind lies between offer and reception, divine gift and human response, the gift having primacy and the response being itself implied in the gift.⁷

Apart from Tvard's significant point of view here, the reason for the need of a correlative understanding in ecclesiology is probably the multifaceted nature of the church⁸, which in itself requires a unifying insight. Many ecclesiological themes are usually understood and discussed as constituted by a dialectical relationship between two or more different elements, which are not supposed to be contradictory simply because they belong to a reality, the church, which participates in God's transcendence. For example, we could mention the relationship between the spiritual church - which Tillich calls the 'Spiritual Community'⁹ - and the visible church, the universal church and the individual local churches existing throughout the world, the church living in history and the one in eternity, and so on. Basically, the methodological question that underlies these dialectical elements of ecclesiology appears to be the identification of the historical origin of the church on one side, visible, local, plural; and on the other, invisible, universal, unique. Granted that the ultimate foundation of the church is the Trinitarian God, what then is the historical starting point of such a complex reality? The more we understand the church's origins, the more we have the possibility to develop an ecclesiology capable of explaining all the elements and dimensions of the church in their proper relationship. Of course, we could simply accept its plurality as it is without additional theological inquiry; since the church's mystery participates in the transcendence of God, it could be accepted as a multifaceted reality bringing on a complex mission in which human life and divine action are strictly related. In any event, in order that there be theological progress in the field of ecclesiology, we need to improve progressively our understanding of that relationship. Since the solution of many

7 GEORGE H. TAVARD, *The Church, Community of salvation, An Ecumenical Ecclesiology*, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 11.

8 See SEVERINO DIANICH *Ecclesiologia. Questioni di metodo e una proposta*, (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 1993), p. 17 ff.

9 See PAUL TILlich, *Systematic Theology. Vol. 3. Life and the Spirit. History and the Kingdom of God* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 162 ff.

ecclesiological problems depends significantly on the way in which we understand the mutual relationship between the church's divine and human dimensions, we need to find a unifying perspective in order to focus our understanding of this point. What we are going to do is to verify Tillich's method of correlation, properly reinterpreted and delivered by some intrinsic limits, in order to see if it might represent this principle as able to explain the complexity of the church.

2. The Church as the community of correlation

Tillich's aim is to develop an apologetic theology¹⁰ which is able to offer answers to human questions in relation to the ultimate concern of human existence¹¹, that is, the mystery of God. This is the specific intention which inspires his theological method, synthetically described in these well-known words:

Symbolically speaking, God answers man's questions, and under the impact of God's answers man asks them. Theology formulates the questions implied in human existence and theology formulates the answers implied in divine self-manifestation under the guidance of the questions implied in human existence. This is a circle which drives man to a point where question and answer are not separated.¹²

At the beginning of this process there are questions implied in human existence, which in the modern world are properly interpreted by existential philosophy, and the task of theology is to find the answers to those questions through the explication of divine revelation; subsequently, these answers allow new questions to arise, so that a mutual interdependence takes place between them. Tillich states that the possibility for the human person to ask questions and to receive correlated answers is founded in ontology: on one side, this being participates in the infinite, in the realm of essence; and on the other, belongs to an existential

10 See PAUL TILlich, *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 1, p. 6-8.

11 'The object of theology is what concerns us ultimately. Only those propositions are theological which deal with their object in so far as it can become a matter of ultimate concern for us' (PAUL TILlich, *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 1, p. 12).

12 PAUL TILlich, *Systematic Theology* vol. 1, p. 61.

and fragmented world. The relationship and separation from its ground, which is being itself, is the exact cause of its asking more and more, as an expression of its tendency to the infinite.¹³ Systematic theology, through existential philosophy, should analyze existentially the human situation and place into evidence the questions implied in it, finally demonstrating that the symbolic understanding of God's mystery of Christian theology is the answer.¹⁴ In order to preserve the transcendent character of the content of divine self-revelation, Tillich specifies that this revelation is spoken to human existence from beyond itself; its content is not produced by human questions, but it is 'given' from above.¹⁵ At the same time, he states that the form in which this content is understood and expressed depends on the questions which it is supposed to answer.¹⁶

From the point of view of the philosophy of religion or of an apologetic of religious experience, Tillich's theological method is well-justified: provided that religion is understood as the concern for God as the ground of being, or Being itself, his method makes it possible to avoid any kind of division between human life and religious experience, thereby preserving at the same time God's transcendence. The need for every human person to be involved in a religious interpretation of life in which the fundamental questions of existence could be seriously taken and potentially answered finds in Tillich's vision a viable framework. On the contrary, from a specifically Christian theological point of view, Tillich's method overlooks some crucial elements, perhaps because of the subsidiary role of biblical doctrine in his method.¹⁷ One of these elements is related to the biblical doctrine of God's people as addressees of revelation, which could

13 See PAUL TILlich, *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 1, p. 61.

14 See PAUL TILlich, *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 1, p. 62.

15 'God is the answer to the question implied in the human finitude. This answer cannot be derived from the analysis of existence' (PAUL TILlich, *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 1, p. 64).

16 See PAUL TILlich, *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 1, p. 64.

17 On the major role of philosophy in the biblical doctrine of Tillich, see AVERY DULLES, 'Paul Tillich and the Bible', in Thomas A. O'Meara and Celestin D. Weisser (eds.), *Paul Tillich in Catholic Thought*, (Iowa: The Priory Press, 1964), p. 131. See also the critic of KENNETH HAMILTON, *The System and the Gospel: a Critique of Paul Tillich* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963), p. 80.

potentially be a starting point for a development of Tillich's method.

In various biblical traditions, God's self-revelation is not directly addressed to the whole of human kind, but to a well-delimited community with its leader, the aim being to form it as God's people through a promise or an alliance. For instance, in the Old Testament, God reveals and communicates itself to Noah and his family, to Abraham and all his descendants, to Moses and all Israel's people, to David and all the Israelites; in the New Testament, God is finally revealed through Jesus Christ to his disciples, namely to the church. Thus, God's self-revelation to the human race is carried on through the dynamics of election, that is to say, through the choice of one people among others and the address of revelation to them exclusively. Evidently, the ultimate aim of election is that God may be revealed to all peoples of the world so that all may be saved; the revelation to be disseminated over all the earth is initially and primarily addressed - and so received and interpreted - not by the human race in general, but by God's people alone. Now, if the Christian revelation is addressed directly to the church, it is there, in the church's own particular understanding, that the correlation process should actually take place.

This ecclesiological point and its deductions could be considered in some way implicit in Tillich's entire theological system. He considers the various visible churches as finite and partial expressions of the spiritual church, the 'Spiritual community'¹⁸, which is the expression of God's

18 'The paradox of the churches is the fact that they participate, on one hand, in the ambiguities of life in general and of the religious life in particular and, on the other hand, in the unambiguous life of the Spiritual Community' (PAUL TILlich, *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 3, p. 165). The same Christological revelation is strictly linked to the church: 'Jesus as the Christ, the miracle of final revelation, and the church, receiving him as the Christ or the final revelation, belong to each other. The Christ is not the Christ without the Church, and the Church is not the Church without the Christ. The final revelation, like every revelation, is correlative' (PAUL TILlich, *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 1, p. 137). See also PAUL TILlich, *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 2, p. 136. MAURICE B. SCHEPERS, 'Paul Tillich on the Church', in Thomas A. O'Meara and Celestin D. Weisser (eds.), *Paul Tillich in Catholic Thought*, (Iowa: The Priory Press, 1964), p. 240-241.

kingdom in human history.¹⁹ Since those churches participate both in fragmented human life and in the definitive reality of the kingdom, they are the only possible realm for correlation between human questions and revealed answers: any other realm would lack either the former or the latter element, both of which are necessary for the correlation to take place. The correlative method appears to be something that can be developed only within the church. This idea, even if not explicitly expressed by Tillich and perhaps only conditionally acceptable from his point of view, nonetheless seems to be in line with his understanding of the role of the church in the acceptance of revelation:

The Christian church is based on the final revelation and is supposed to receive it in a continuous process of reception, interpretation, and actualization. This is a revelatory process with all the marks of revelation.²⁰

The process of receiving God's revelation as attributed to the church is not so qualitatively different from the process of correlation, which seems to be implicitly an ecclesial dynamic. Furthermore, even the role of theologians, who carry on the process of correlation, takes place within the church and is subject to its acceptance:

Since theology is a function of the church, the church is justified in presenting to the theologians the concrete objects of its meditations and contemplations and in rejecting a theology in which these symbols are

19 'The church is related to the ultimate as representing the Kingdom through its acceptance of Christ as New Being, whether in preparation or in fulfilment. In the perspective of the ultimate, the church, then, relates itself to history as its bearer. The deepest meaning of history is salvation, and the content of salvation is the church as the spiritual community in the New Being. The church is the declaratory centre of all implicit meanings, which anticipatorily and fragmentarily are organically related to its being [...] as the constant centre of all meaning which is the Kingdom' (NELS F. S. FERRÉ, "Tillich's view of the church", in Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (eds.), *The theology of Paul Tillich*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961), p. 251).

20 PAUL TILlich, *Systematic Theology. Vol. 1*, p. 144.

rejected or have lost their meaning.²¹

If theologians function as primary actors in the correlative process takes place in the context of the church and if the church has the implicit right to judge their theology, this seems to be a positive affirmation of the ecclesial character of the correlative process in Tillich's system.

This idea, which seems to be merely an element implicit in his thought, could actually determine a new understanding of it. What this insight indicates is that the questions which are correlated with divine revelation cannot be simply the existential ones because the range of the inquires raised in the Christian community in mutual relation with revelation are actually much broader. In other words, if it is the church which is the realm of theological correlation, existential inquiries do not provide a sufficient theological point of view from which revelation could be understood, because the ecclesial questions related to divine revelation are not only those connected with the meaning of life and its intrinsic limits. If we understand the history of theology as the history of the questions that the church has proposed to the body of revelation, we could say that ecclesial inquiries are also connected with the identity of the triune God (the Christological, pneumatological and Trinitarian problem), with the identity of the church itself and the means through which God relates with human beings (the ecclesiological²² and sacramental problem), with the identity of the human person not simply as called to overcome existential anxieties but to be a son or daughter of God (Christian anthropology), with the evangelical behavior deriving from faith and the way in which the church must carry on its mission (the ethical, pastoral and practical problem), and so on. The questions of the church are not only anthropological, arising from the human condition - those pointed out by Tillich's insight - but also specifically theological, as generated by God's self-revelation.

3. The wide realm of correlation

From Tillich's point of view, these considerations could probably be

21 PAUL TILlich, *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 3, p. 202.

22 Tillich himself points out that the church must ask questions about its nature: PAUL TILlich, *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 3, p. 195.

considered as leading to a misunderstanding of the sense in which he deals with human inquiry. In his system, existential questions are those deriving from anxiety as the basic expression of the modern awareness of human ontological finitude²³; these questions are correlated with revelation as expressions of that human need to be rescued from the finitude which brings the human person to inquire more and more. In this perspective, the above mentioned theological questions not directly related to human life cannot be included in that existential human inquiry which is supposed to orient the human being to Being itself, namely to God; therefore, some of the church's questions cannot enter into the correlation process. Actually, here Tillich's system comes to a controversial point.

Obviously, no one doubts that God's self-revelation is the potential fulfillment of what the human being is and what he/she needs. Yet this does not mean that the human being is fully aware of its ontological need to enter into a relationship with the ground of Being, who is God; what is true on the ontological level is not necessarily wholly acknowledged on the level of consciousness. Actually, this awareness, when existing, cannot be other than a limited interpretation of the ontological human need for God. In fact, granted that the human person in its natural essence is open to God so that he/she can be defined ontologically by God's call to participate in its life²⁴, if this need of God could be completely understood and consciously expressed through human questions, then the human being could completely grasp its ultimate essence; it should not be anymore a mystery unto itself since it should have the same knowledge of its identity that God has. On the contrary, since human persons cannot have a divine understanding of themselves, the ontological need they have for God cannot be completely, univocally and consciously expressed in human

23 See PAUL TILlich, *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 1, p. 64.

24 The theological anthropology supposed here is based on Thomas' teaching about human '*desiderium naturale videndi Deum*' (see *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 3, a. 8; *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, chapters 25, 50) and on its following developments in theology of XIX century. This teaching about the natural vocation of the human person to God's vision is already common in Catholic theology and has been accepted by the Catholic magisterium: see, for instance, JOHN PAUL II, *Message to Pontifical Lateranense University*, November 7, 1996, n. 3, in "Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II", 19 (1996) II, 656.

questions, not even in existential ones. Of course, a basic (analogical) awareness of the human need for God is possible and necessary to be able to accept consciously God's self-revelation; existentialist thinking, with all its developments, is probably the most effective way to make conscious and interpret ontological human finitude and the corresponding need for God in our time. Yet existential questions are to be considered only a way to interpret and explicate the ontological human need for salvation, something which is actually ineffable. This is demonstrated also by the fact that in past ages, the ontological human need for God has been expressed in non-existential inquiries.

Actually, the meeting of human existential questions with revelation cannot but produce a broadening of those questions which issues from the simple existential realm and approach the theological level, becoming questions about God, Christ, Christian anthropology and so on. In developed Christian religious experience, for instance, the apparently abstract theological theme about the triune God, even if not directly related to existence, is indeed a meaningful expression of the human need of salvation. In this way the correlation between human questions and divine answers could avoid a problem which might arise in Tillich's system: the human questions cannot delimit the understanding of the contents of revelation to a particular realm, even the existential one, because God's self-revelation is always far beyond them all. However, if we consider that human inquiry in itself is always the limited interpretation and expression of the whole human need for God and, at the same time, its existential connotation as simply only one characterization of it, then the principle of correlation could be fully accepted since it avoids an existential reduction of the human understanding of its need for God. What we have discovered from a simple ecclesiological insight is that the church is the realm of correlative process with all its questions, existential and theological; this can find a confirmation in the understanding of human questions as not merely limited to existential ones but as a wider expression of human finitude.

An ecclesiological understanding of human inquiry makes it easier to explain its relationship to culture, which could not be so easily justified in an individual interpretation of the correlative process. General trends and

influences of the latter may indeed play a role in the wider realm of cultural development, but individuals do not have this capability.

Actually the religious Classics²⁵ of Christian tradition, which in some way have influenced world's cultures, are not simply the expression of a single intelligent mind, but should be considered as arising from a gradual and wide hermeneutical process of correlation between Christian tradition and human life carried on by all the members of a church in a specific time²⁶; this process is then taken up, understood and systematically explicated and developed by the genius of an author, who is nevertheless an expression of the church to which he or she belongs. A Classic could then be described as a text arising ultimately through a process in which the anthropological and theological questions and their correlative answers are expressed by the religious community within its particular culture and through the conceptual possibilities it offers; this process is then interpreted, improved, systematically structured and exposed by the author of the text. So we could define the Classics as the living expression of the ecclesial correlation between human questions and divine answers able to improve other cultures' understanding of the problems of human life in the light of faith. Theologically understood, the same tradition of the church could be interpreted as the story of the correlation between human questions and theological answers in different places and times. The difficulty of interpreting the Christian tradition lies exactly in this strict correlation between revelation and human questions, which are not always easily distinguishable.

Because they have their roots in the wide ecclesial correlative process of the faith and human life, the Christian Classics could become an instrument for the transmission of values and meanings to other cultures.

25 The word 'Classics' is used here in the sense given by DAVID TRACY, *The Analogical Imagination, Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 108.

26 This seems to be a necessary consequence of what Tillich rightly states about the necessary integration of theologians in the church: PAUL TILlich, *Systematic Theology. Vol. 3*, p. 202. This is in line with the Catholic doctrine of *sensus fidei*, according to which all the members of the church are involved in the hermeneutical process of reinterpretation of the faith under the guidance of their pastors. See COUNCIL VATICAN II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* n. 12.

Every culture has offered to Christianity the support of its own language and its vision of the world, but at the same time, the Christian vision of reality has also provided those cultures with many basic insights which, at least, in Western society, are almost definitively part of their tradition. No one could doubt that serious, continuous thinking about God's self-revelation in the Christian community has produced a more human understanding of existence for all people, at least in the Occident.

4. Ecclesiological development

Until now, we have reinterpreted the process of correlation as the mutual development between the human ontological need for God as interpreted through questions that only initially could be delimited to the existential realm and the human understanding of the related answers arising from God's revelation. Provided that the correlation is ecclesiologicaly collocated and not delimited to the existential realm, as we have previously suggested, it could be an important and constructive insight for the development of many theological topics. Basically, its potentiality is to identify a line between a dialectical approach, in which God's transcendence risks overcoming human reality, and an analogical method, which could reduce the ungraspable reality of God to mere human concepts. The method of correlation is able to preserve the value of nature as the way of God's self-revelation and of its human understanding, and, at the same time, to express the need for created reality to transcend itself in order to fulfil its call to God's life. Since we want to focus on ecclesiological issues, in this paper we shall limit our inquiry to trying to sketch the ways in which the process of correlation could be used as a theological framework to understand the origin of the complex identity, visible and invisible, of the church.

First of all, the problem at hand must be defined more precisely. The church, both in its visible and spiritual dimensions²⁷, arises and grows up from the acceptance of the Christological claim by human persons through

27 The sense in which the terms 'visible' and 'spiritual' are used here is 'historical' and 'transcending history' and is well sketched in GEORGE H. TAVARD, *The Church, Community of salvation. An Ecumenical Ecclesiology*, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 16.

the power of the Holy Spirit. Now, it is not difficult to understand how the invisible and spiritual action of the divine Spirit could make up the spiritual church, incorporating the persons who accept the gospel in the invisible communion which is the body of Christ; what should be explained is how the spiritual action of the Spirit could generate a visible community which is the historical expression of that spiritual communion. In fact, for a visible community to arise, we need a visible cause able to produce this effect, and the Spirit alone does not possess this necessary characteristic. We may then recall that the Spirit builds the church through the human words of Christians who give their witness to Jesus as their saviour: and therefore the visible community arises by the power of the Spirit insofar as it acts through the historical words of the evangelizers. Thus, this effects the problem of the relationship between the role of the Spirit and that of the human witnesses of the gospel in the generation of the church.

This fundamental question could have many different solutions according to the theological method we use. A dialectical approach is basically oriented to defending God's transcendence and the primacy of its action over what is created; in this perspective, the human role in the formation of the church risks being reduced to a mere impersonal instrumentality in order to save the primary role of the Spirit. In this schema, the evangelizer's understanding of the faith, culture and world view would play a very incidental role in the generation and development of the church because everything is simply attributed to the Spirit's unique action. The consequences of this understanding of the problem could be problematic: it would imply, for instance, that Christian evangelization is the simple repetition of the biblical doctrine (fundamentalism), since the leading role of the Spirit in building the church would absolutely not need any human role, even the interpretation and the enculturation of the message; or it could mean understanding the universal church as the communion of uniform local communities, since in every place the action of the Spirit should be always the same and, given that there is no role and involvement of what is human in the foundation of the church, every local church must have the same form.

On the other hand, we have what we could call an anthropological

understanding of the relationship between the Spirit and human action: this approach is concerned with preserving the dignity and role of creation, thus insuring its ability to work as a main actor in God's project of salvation. An anthropological understanding of the relationship between the role of the Spirit and the one of the evangelizers could risk disregarding completely the transcendent character of the action of the Spirit and of the revelation itself. If so, the evangelical message would be reduced simply to what is understood as meaningful by current human consciousness; it should lose its transcendent character and so its freedom to open human consciousness to new, unexpected meanings. In the ecclesiological realm, this approach could allow every local church the right to develop its own understanding of Christianity completely apart from the tradition of the universal church in order to correspond to the specific needs of meaning within its own culture. Of course, the Bible and the tradition of the church should be reinterpreted but not abandoned or misconceived.

If we accept the Tillich's statement, according to which God's self-revelation can be understood and accepted only as a transcendent answer to human questions in a correlative process, the problem at issue could find a tentative solution. In Tillich's perspective, as we have revisited it, the church as a community of salvation could be interpreted as the community of correlation in which God's transcendent word is understood and accepted in the form of a correlative process made possible by the Spirit. If the church is intrinsically the creature of God's word and if this word may be accepted only in the dynamics of correlation, than the church exists only insofar as God, through its Spirit, gives its word to the church, thus making possible the correlative process with initiating human questions. The transcendent character of revelation is preserved because, as Tillich states, the answers of revelation are not deducible from human questions; the analogical understanding of that revelation is maintained as well because the eternal word of God is understood and expressed through human questions and in human concepts.

In this viewpoint, the relationship between the role of the evangelizers and the Holy Spirit, which is the problem at issue, could find a possible interpretation: the human words with which they announce the gospel and make the church grow appear to be the outcome of a correlative process

between the human questions of the Christian communities to which they belong and the divine answers. The Christian message which they preach is the divine revelation itself expressed in the limited and visible form of answered questions. God's action and human interpretation are thereby bonded together in the human claim of evangelizers, and for this reason can create and build up the church; this message has, in fact, the power of the transcendent revelation since it is a symbol of divine answers, and the ability to be meaningful for human beings since it is an expression of human inquiry. Only a message springing from a collective correlative process can produce the same dynamic in other persons and so influence their coming to faith. On the contrary, when God's transcendent answers or human questions are misunderstood or not correlated, the evangelization cannot take place.

If the proclamation of the gospel which forms the church is actually the dissemination of theological answers that a Christian community has given to its existential and theological questions, we have then a key at least to improve our theological understanding of various ecclesiological themes, perhaps to build a whole ecclesiology along a 'third way' between a dialectical approach and an anthropological one. For instance, our approach could establish a proper understanding of the local dimension of the church. If the claim of the gospel represents the very root from which the church springs up both in its spiritual and visible dimensions and if this claim represents revelation itself expressed in the limited and visible form of answered human questions, then a Christian community is always built on a culturally influenced understanding of faith. Inevitably every church has its own understanding of the unique message of revelation because it is grounded on a correlation between that same revelation of God in Jesus Christ and its own specific questions which are always culturally related. In this perspective, the culture of the country in which a visible church lives is theologically relevant not just as a target of its mission, but also as a necessary dimension of the origin and the life of the Christian community there. In the sense of the correlative process, every local church influences its culture but at the same time arises from it. This insight could help us to understand the value of dialogue between church and society: it is not simply directed towards the evangelization of the latter but also to the

ecclesial understanding of its cultural roots; a local church understands its identity both in the specific religious approach to the Bible and the Christian tradition and from the viewpoint of the culture in which it lives. If dialogue presupposes the mutual acknowledgement of learning something from the other's point of view, then our approach justifies the assertion that the church can have a genuine dialogue with society.

In conclusion, Tillich's method of correlation is still relevant to our theological inquiries today. If properly understood and developed, it could help to avoid the risks of a radical dialectical approach or of a drastic anthropological understanding of revelation, with all the consequences these imply. The hope is that this paper might give some further insights on Tillich's method in order to make his method more useful for contemporary theological constructions.