

**Title- Homiletical Insights from Paul Tillich and Wonhyo: Focusing on Their Understanding of God and Ultimate Reality**

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**Things Unbearable**

by Kyong Ri Park(1926-2008)

Since I moved into the Dankoodong village  
I was pricked by a thorned larva on the arm,  
To be swollen red and hot ...

My pain did not stop there;  
Locust-trees, thorn trees, and wild roses,  
Kept pricking me poisonously.

Still it did not stop there;  
The day I pulled along those cut branches of Jujube trees,  
By chance I was hit on the calf to be bled by them;  
I said, O you took vengeance on me,  
And I tried not to mind much.

But what I can never bear at all,  
Is the eyes of those people;  
Because they are poorer than I,  
Or richer than I,  
Or more handsome than I,  
Or uglier than I,

Those eyes turned into swords and arrows,  
Those eyes smug with pleasure.<sup>1</sup>

The most excruciating matter that the poet was unable to bear was the eyes of fierce hatred, callous disdain and even distorted pleasure. Those eyes symbolize the inhumane objectification and alienation of others. Tragically, we see that the disparity between the rich and the poor, and the disjunction among diverse cultural and racial groups are being aggravated to an enormous level in many societies. In this present context, preachers need to ask: "Can our preaching ministry serve as a healing and renewing factor regarding the prickly

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<sup>1</sup> Kyung Li Park, "Things Unbearable," accessed 20 August 2014, available from <http://pann.nate.com/talk/118442002>, translated by Hyun Kyuk Kim.

situations of degenerating separation and conflicts? What would be the fundamental learning that we need to explore regarding this weighty question?"

I understand that Paul Tillich and a Korean Buddhist thinker Wonhyo's understanding of divinity or ultimate reality can be a new starting point at which we may learn to renew our theological and homiletical directions in order to respond more meaningfully to the question mentioned above. Both of them comprehend that the way the ultimate being or reality permeates the entire world is the fundamental basis on which we understand how to perceive, relate and interact with others. The synergic learning of both of them may result in more profound understanding of the ministry which we care about wholeheartedly: preaching.

### **Tillich's Understanding of God**

In his theological understanding of God, Tillich emphasizes the significance of God's being which engages and enlivens God's whole creation. In that sense, his point of view is in line with the Christian traditional idea of God. Nevertheless, Tillich's view of God reveals his theological critique and depth about how to understand God.

Tillich explains that we should not perceive God as a being but understand God as "being-itself" or "the ground of being."<sup>2</sup> What problems would happen when we understand God as a being amongst other beings? When God is considered to be a being, God is *a part* within the whole structure of reality commonly perceived. Even though God is placed at the loftiest and the most splendid point of the structure, he is still bound to the categories of finitude. Tillich points out that when God is placed within the structure, "the subject-object structure of reality"<sup>3</sup> restricts God, which reflects our perennial epistemological tendency. We can consider the possibilities as follows regarding the divine-human relationship.

God can take the position of a subject and we turn into "an object which is nothing more than an object." God, as an all knowing and all powerful subject, may rule and oppress human agents. This is a God that atheism has revolted against with the rightful and appropriate reason. Also importantly within the structure of human reality, God can be "an object for us as subjects."<sup>4</sup> Tillich points out that "the history of religion is full of human attempts to ... use [divine power] for human purposes."<sup>5</sup> Various religious strategies and tactics such as diverse forms of prayers and rites can be invented and put into practice for the purpose of impressing, appeasing or even striking a deal with a god. The purpose reflects the objectification of the other, which finite human beings use in treating each other. Interestingly the Book of Job shows that Satan could not help looking at religion as being essentially saturated with the purpose to objectify and manipulate God "in the interest of advantages humans seek to derive."<sup>6</sup>

Tillich understands that we need to let God be God, who as being-itself transcends the commonsensically accepted human categories and is not subject to the structure of finite beings. Nevertheless, God's purpose is not simply to confirm the infinite qualitative difference between being itself and the finite beings. Tillich explains that "everything finite participates in being-itself and in its infinity. Otherwise ... It would be swallowed by

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology Volume 1: Reason and Revelation Being and God* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 235.

<sup>3</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 185.

<sup>4</sup> Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 185.

<sup>5</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 185.

<sup>6</sup> Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 134.

nonbeing, or it never would have emerged out of nonbeing.”<sup>7</sup> The divine power is the infinite power of being, which resists “nonbeing” in everything that is. To understand God as “the ground of being” is appropriate in that God is the ground and basis on which every being moves, acts and lives with the power and joy of life. Profoundly the power of being-itself is actualized and embodied in finite beings. For this reason, Tillich emphasizes that “The ultimate can become actual only through the concrete, through that which is preliminary and transitory.”<sup>8</sup> Each being participates in the infinity of the ground of being, and also the ground of being participates in the actual existence of each being and its concrete experiences. We can see that the essence of the relationship between each being and the ground of being cannot be viewed or captured as a form of fixed dichotomic structure of subject and object.

There have been scholars who have criticized Tillich for the reason that his overall understanding of God lacks the idea of a personal God in the biblical tradition. However, in Tillich’s understanding, the encounter between the God above God and humans is not simply impersonal, even though he does not restrict the scope of the encounter within the dimensions of being personal. Tillich explains: “Personal God does not mean that God is a person. It means that God is the ground of everything personal and that he carries within himself the ontological power of personality. He is not a person, but he is not less than personal.” Tillich appreciates the biblical tradition’s great contribution of understanding God as being personal, but he balances “personalism with respect to God with “a transpersonal presence of the divine.”<sup>9</sup> Because of the transpersonal presence, the genuine encounter between God and humans becomes possible, which transcends the scope of the encounter between two personal beings. Tillich describes,

If we speak ... of the ego-thou relationship between God and man, the thou embraces the ego and consequently the entire relation. If it were otherwise, if the ego-thou relationship with God was proper rather than symbolic, the ego could withdraw from the relation. But there is no place to which man can withdraw from the divine thou, because it includes the ego and is nearer to the ego than the ego to itself.<sup>10</sup>

Even though the ego-thou relation is a more appropriate idea than the distinction of the subject-object structure, still even the term “the ego-thou relation” falls far short of plumbing the incredible depth of the relationship between the ground of being and each finite being. Tillich remarks that it is the relationship that wholly embraces the entirety of each being.<sup>11</sup>

As mentioned above, Tillich comprehends that being-itself resists nonbeing and affirms itself against nonbeing, but he also understands that God “includes nonbeing.” In this sense the power of the ground of being and meaning is the power to negate the negation of being.<sup>12</sup> God accepts and includes even the abysmal pain and threat of nonbeing into the Godself, and

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<sup>7</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 237.

<sup>8</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 118.

<sup>9</sup> Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 187.

<sup>10</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 271.

<sup>11</sup> Considering the profound character of the relationship between the ground of being and finite being, Tillich warns theologians - including anyone who talks about God- to remember that they unavoidably commit the weighty error of making God an object of their discourse while they are the subjects of the discourse. Tillich is aware that theology is far from being a pure academic or intellectual task, given the huge mystery of what God is like and how God relates to numerous beings and the whole world. Being filled with God’s mysterious power of being that fills the cosmos is the prerequisite for the task of theology and its proclamation. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 172-173 and 272.

<sup>12</sup> Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 271.

ultimately does not allow the power of nonbeing to prevail against the power of being. God “participates in the negativities of creaturely existence”<sup>13</sup> to the extent that the hunger and thirst of the maltreated are virtually God’s own. Even “the hidden, the dark, the unconscious is present”<sup>14</sup> in God and thus it does not allow the ultimate duality to be formed in God’s creation.

### **Wonhyo’s Understanding of One Mind**

Wonhyo is a Buddhist scholar (617-680 C.E.) who has had a very significant influence not only in the history of Korean Buddhism but also in the Korean history of thought. Young Sup Ko describes him as a man of “elaborate thinking, vigorous writing skills and overflowing beauty of human touch.”<sup>15</sup> Three countries (Goguryeo, Baekje, Silla) had been formed in Korea until Silla unified the other two countries (676 C.E.) through the repeated wars among the three countries. (Wonhyo was from Silla) Buddhism was officially introduced to Korea in the year of 372. Since Buddhism was introduced to Korea, the diverse sectarian teachings about the truths of Buddhism competed with each other in Korea. In the context where political and social conflicts and even religious-doctrinal confusion and opposition were intense, Wonhyo called the ultimate reality of Buddhism One Mind. He emphasized the importance of the right understanding of it, and living according to, with and in it as awakened and transformed beings.

We need to use careful discernment when we use the term “ultimate reality” regarding the teachings of Buddhism, because Buddhism understands that emptiness is an axis by which they perceive the true nature of the ultimate reality: “The characteristics of emptiness is empty ... the emptiness of emptiness is also empty ... These kinds of emptiness do not subsist in [different] characteristics, and they are not empty of *true reality*.” (the Buddha, in *Vairasamadhi-sutra*)<sup>16</sup> Sutras of Buddhism teach that “object, subject, emptiness,” one’s own noticeable achievements, prominent social position, etc. are “all empty of essential nature.”<sup>17</sup> The emphasis on emptiness is not meant to foster nihilism but to bring awakening to those who have been deluded by their chronic attachment to beings or matters around them.

If we understand God’s divine reality as a being amongst other beings, the Buddhist view of ultimate reality may seem to be basically illogical or confusing in comparison with the clarity that we think the Christian divine reality can contain and present. Nevertheless Tillich indicates that the existence of the God above God is not a matter which we can verify or approve by our own available logical or experiential tools. God provides the structure of finite beings and at the same time transcends it. For this reason, when we try to answer the question of the existence of God through the logical or experiential mechanism that can work within the structure, we result in denying the true nature of God—even though our purpose is to try to give a reasonable proof for the existence of God. In this sense, Tillich says “it is as atheistic to affirm the existence of God as it is to deny it.”<sup>18</sup> It is to treat God as if God is an object whose existence or nonexistence we can deal with through our intellectual capacity.

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<sup>13</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 270.

<sup>14</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 279.

<sup>15</sup> Young Sup Ko, “A Reflection on the Study of Wonhyo—Yesterday and Today,” in *Ten Korean Thinkers: Wonhyo* (Seoul, Korea: Yemoon-Seowon, 2011), 15.

<sup>16</sup> Wang Shik Jang, *Wonhyo’s Doctrines of ultimate Reality and Faith: A Whiteheadian Evaluation* (Ph. D. diss, Clariment Graduate School 1992), 18.

<sup>17</sup> Jang, *Wonhyo’s Doctrines of ultimate Reality and Faith*, 22 quoting *The Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom*, tr. and ed. by Edward Conze (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 143-148.

<sup>18</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 237.

When we understand God through Tillich's theological guidance, it is more probable to learn to apprehend with what purpose Buddhists want to liberate their understanding of reality from the bondage of the common categories of existence. Buddhism gives a serious warning that even what we perceive as ultimate reality can be an object that causes our delusion and attachment, according to how we understand it and for what purpose. Emptiness can work as an unsettling message that calls for the overall examination of the structure or the amalgamation of finite categories from a higher or more fundamental point of view.

Wonhyo understands that One Mind transcends the distinction of reality and non-reality. With the transformed perspective based on the abysmal depth of One Mind, paradoxically one is invited to acknowledge the dynamic relatedness of reality and non-reality.

Talking about reality (or being), reality does not differ from non-reality (or emptiness). Therefore, although it is already said to be real, it does not increase into a permanent reality. The reason is that since it is only allowed tentatively, it actually does not fall into any reality. But, it is not that reality does not fall into a reality. Even if reality was said to be identical with non-reality, it is not reduced to any non-reality. . . . Therefore, even if they are both allowed, they are not contradictory to each other. They are both allowed because they are not false. They are both rejected because they are not permanently true. Then this rejection is not different from allowing, just as reality does not differ from non-reality.<sup>19</sup>

Wonhyo teaches that within One Mind, emptiness and being, reality and non-reality do not exclude each other but are complementary through their temporality and flexibility. Through this awakened view based on One Mind, Wonhyo understands that we may learn the possibility which matters or opinions that seem to be inevitably contradictory can coexist and even be harmonized, since One Mind is the matrix of everything- including reality and non-reality- in the cosmos in its most fundamental sense.<sup>20</sup>

When Wonhyo worked as a Buddhist scholar and monk, Madhyamika and Yogācāra were prominent sects of Buddhism, whose main teachings were obviously contrasted. Jeong Hee Eun explains that Madhyamika focused on the original purity and absolute calmness of ultimate reality and Yogācāra's emphasis was on the continuous concrete changes that are involved in the status of being defiled within ultimate reality.<sup>21</sup> Wonhyo names the emphasis of Madhyamika the world of true thusness and the emphasis of Yogācāra the world of arising and extinction. In Wonhyo's view, originally One Mind is pure and free from arising and extinction. Nevertheless when it moves, arising and extinction occur.<sup>22</sup> Wonhyo understands that paradoxically these seemingly opposite aspects comprise a huge wholeness of One Mind. Jong Wook Kim comments that if there is only the aspect of true thusness in One Mind, One Mind may be absolutized as an immortal, immovable and linear status or influence.<sup>23</sup> As in Tillich's understanding of God, Wonhyo's view of One Mind excludes the ultimate duality. Wonhyo explains:

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<sup>19</sup> Jang, *Wonhyo's Doctrines of ultimate Reality and Faith*, 67 quoting Wonhyo, *Treatise on the Harmonization of Disputes in Ten Aspects*. ed. Wonhyo-jonso-gukyuk-kanhaeng'hoe (Seoul: Wonhyo-jonso-gukyuk-kanhaeng'hoe, 1989), vol. 5, 786- 788.

<sup>20</sup> In this sense, Wonhyo asserts that that One Mind is the basis for harmonizing seemingly conflicting views.

<sup>21</sup> Jeong Hee Eun, "Wonhyo's Creative Interpretation of of Samsae and Alaya-vijnana," in *Ten Korean Thinkers: Wonhyo* (Seoul, Korea: Yemoon-Seowon, 2011), 115.

<sup>22</sup> Eun, "Wonhyo's Creative Interpretation of Samsae and Alaya-vijnana," 115.

<sup>23</sup> Jong Wook Kim, "An Ontological Interpretation of Wonhyo's thought," 23, accessed 3 August 2014, available from [http://philinst.snu.ac.kr/thought/48/1\\_%EA%B9%80%EC%A2%85%EC%9A%B1.pdf](http://philinst.snu.ac.kr/thought/48/1_%EA%B9%80%EC%A2%85%EC%9A%B1.pdf)

Therefore, in this aspect of arising and ceasing suchness is also embraced. It is like the nature of fine clay dust which joins to make an earthen vessel but never loses the attributes of being of the nature of fine clay dust. Therefore, the aspect of earthenware embraces fine clay dust. . . . In fact, . . . their boundaries are indistinguishable. Therefore, each of them without exception completely embraces all noumenal and phenomenal *Dharmas*. Hence the words, "*These two aspects are inseparable from one another.*"<sup>24</sup>

The world of true thusness never loses the attribute but the boundaries of the two worlds are inseparable. The two worlds are not the same but not completely distinguished from each other. With the traits of the world of true thusness and the world of arising and extinction, Wonhyo gives his explanation why he has named ultimate reality One Mind.

The essence of the status of being pure and that of being defiled are not distinguished. The door of truthfulness and that of foolishness are not discriminated. For this reason I use the word "One." The basis that does not allow two to be distinguished from each other is the true nature of all *Dharmas*. It is not merely void or meaningless. As the nature works mysteriously by itself, I call it "Mind."<sup>25</sup>

For this reason that One Mind embraces the totality of the world of true thusness and the world of arising and extinction, Eun explains that we can return to the original state of being awakened and enlightened from the state of being deluded and defiled.<sup>26</sup> The door to enter into the depth of the truthfulness and purity of One Mind is near and within us because it is immanent in the midst of daily works, rest, struggles and joy. As Jang says, "One Mind is so fully immanent in the sentient beings [and in the mundane world] as to await discovery by them."<sup>27</sup> This invitation for discovery of One Mind is given to each human being who is also a complex mixture of enlightenment and non-enlightenment, purity and defilement. In this sense the Buddhists' salvific experience is not to seek an "otherworldly transcendence," but to realize "the multivalent web of interrelationships connecting the individual to his environment and fellowmen,"<sup>28</sup> and move constantly through the complicated web toward the true fulfillment of being that needs to be actualized within the web of interrelationships.

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<sup>24</sup> Jang, *Wonhyo's Doctrines of ultimate Reality and Faith*, 56 quoting *Kumkanq Sammae Kyung Non* (Treatise on the Van rasamadhi Sutra) in *Wonhyo's Complete Collection* (Seoul: Wonhyo-jonjip-kukyok-kanhang'hoe, 1989), 158.

<sup>25</sup> Young Sup Ko, "The Unification Theory of Wonhyo," in *Ten Korean Thinkers: Wonhyo* (Seoul, Korea: Yemoon-Seowon, 2011), 187, quoting WonHyo, *A Collection of Korean Buddhism*, 741.

<sup>26</sup> Eun, "Wonhyo's Creative Interpretation of Samsae and Alaya-vijnana," 117. Buddhism teaches that originally, humans are enlightened beings.

<sup>27</sup> Jang, *Wonhyo's Doctrines of ultimate Reality and Faith*, 56-57.

<sup>28</sup> Jang, *Wonhyo's Doctrines of ultimate Reality and Faith*, 41-42 quoting Robert Buswell, *The Formation of Ch'an Ideology in China and Korea*, 77.