

WHAT WILL MAKE PREACHING RELEVANT? Consequences of Tillich's religious phenomenology on preaching

Máté MÁRKUS

The title of my study is **What makes preaching relevant?** This question can be examined from many points of view. Below I would like to approach the question from Tillich's religious phenomenology. So, my exact question is what implications Tillich's religious phenomenology has on the relevance of preaching.

The question is prompted by a phenomenon the church has to deal with in the present decades. This phenomenon is the decline in the number of church members, those participating in our Sunday services. The church has to determine the reasons for this decline rapidly and react. Practically the reasons for the drop can be examined on the side of both the preaching and the listeners of the preaching, and - naturally - in the interdependence of the two. Ordinarily, the side of the preaching is examined by homiletics, and the side of the listeners by sociology, mainly religious sociology. Though under the layer of religious sociology, there is a deeper layer on this side, that should be considered too: religious phenomenology.

The subject of religious phenomenology is the religiosity of man, as an essential element of the human being, and as an expression of this essence in the practice of religion. Participating in the practice of the church is a particular case of participating in the practice of religion. At this point, the decline in the number of participants of the church is converting to the subject of religious phenomenology. Theoretically, there could be two possible reasons for the phenomenon above. People are less religious than they used to be. This explanation shifts the responsibility of those who form religious practice to those who do not participate. But the lack of religious practice does not mean the lack of religiosity. A starting point of religious phenomenology is that the human being is essentially religious. This means that the human being is not able to lose from his religiosity, because it belongs to him, as his essence. So, if we negate that the cause of the lack of religious practice is the lack of religiosity, we have to accept the second reasoning. Which states: people are as religious as they used to be, but the present religious practice (here preaching) is not in connection to their religious concern, and this is why they are not participating in it. So, the lack of religious practice is not the lack of religiosity but the lack of relevance of this present practice. Consequently, what people front in the church is not relevant for them. If it is correct, it results in two logical questions. 1. What is the subject of human being's religious concern? / What is relevant for the human being? 2. How could connect the religious practice (here preaching) to this religious concern? / How the practice (here preaching) could be relevant?

These are the two questions of this study that I would like to examine processing Paul Tillich's **Courage to Be, Dynamics of Faith, The Religious Situation, Systematic Theology**.

What is the subject of human being's religious concern?

Tillich, writing on the state of human existence, introduces is a term. The term of alienation. Man is alienated from himself. The actual existence of man is not equal to his essential

existence. Man is not existing in the state, how he should, or how he could. This existential experience is expressed in the symbols of religions. (The symbol of the Garden of Eden expresses this alienation too.)

The essence of the alienation of man is, that within the conditions of his existence non-existence is also present, as the negativity of his existence. Man is aware of his existence and his possible non-existence. Non-existence manifests within the conditions of existence for every being. But the human being is the only one, who is aware of that. The awareness of his possible non-existence forms the religious situation.

So, man has the possibility to be aware of his existence, and his possible non-existence. Non-existence manifests within the conditions of existence. If we consider the conditions of existence as a sphere, non-being breaks through this sphere, breaks into this sphere, and manifests in three points: 1. suffering, 2. sin, 3. death. The possibility of non-existence, which is a determinism, makes the man anxious. The anxiety from death manifests in the awareness of senselessness of life, the anxiety from sin in the awareness of self-accusation, and the anxiety from suffering in the awareness of eventuality. Man is aware of his non-existence; this is the cause of his anxiety.

This awareness of non-existence is the basis of the religious situation. The world 'exist' originally means standing out. Man wants to stand out against non-existence, to exist again non-existence. So, the question of man is how to resist non-being. Tillich differentiates the two functions of the mind. The technical mind here proves to be powerless. The technical mind can neutralize many problems but is powerless against the power of non-being. Here the ontological mind asks *How can I defend non-being?*

This is the religious question of man. Religions are formed on the experience of people, who at a particular point of their being experienced, that something, somehow resisted to the swallowing power of non-being. The experience that something resisted nothing. This tremendous experience has to be expressed and will be expressed in symbols. Then symbols, in the case of interdependence, will form myths and cults, creating the phenomenon we name religion. But the very source of the religion is the tremendous experience that something resisted nothing. (In the Old Testament, this experience is expressed in the symbol of the burning bush. It is burning but it is not burning down. The expression of the resistance.)

So, man's religious concern is how to resist. It is not an abstract question for him but his question. How he could participate in the resisting power of being against non-being. This is the religious concern of man. All the religions, which were developed naturally, can be originated from this experience of some people. And consequently, all religion offers the possibility of ontological resistance somehow. The difference between the religions and the protestant religion is that the protestant religion is the only one, that keeps the discontinuity between being and non-being, everything and nothing, so the paradox element of religion. It is inevitable for the ontological resistance to have a paradox element, considering that nothing finite can have enough power to resist the infinite power of nothing. Something is not the opposite of nothing, because it is less than nothing with its infinite power. The opposite of nothing is not something but everything. Only everything can compensate for nothing. So, the religion has to keep the discontinuity in its experience, the paradox element. But religions commonly operate with a logic that something finite accumulates and results in something infinite in its significance that can compensate the infinite power of nothing.

It is spectacularly detectable in the case of Catholicism. Here the finite acts accumulate and will have an infinite significance, and so will be able to compensate the infinite power of non-being manifested in sin. Contrary to this the tremendous recognition of Protestantism is that man is '**Simul Iustus at Peccator**', sinner and right at the same time. This maintains the discontinuity of religion. The man not being able to compensate for his sins remains a sinner

but will be righteous in front of God, because the infinite powerful being, God himself compensates the infinite power of non-being. Participation in the resistance is presented from out of the sphere of the human existence that is in the continuous presence of non-existence, so it has a redemptive element. This redemptive element is the source of the tremendous power of Protestantism.

The religious concern of man: How can I resist the manifestations of non-being? Non-being manifests in three points: 1. suffering, 2. sin, 3. death. In analogy with this Christianity has three main counterpoints. Contrary to the sufferings Christianity sets out the providence of God even in the sufferings (**Creatio** and **Creatio Continua**). Contrary to the sin Christianity sets out God, who justifies the sinner (**Iustificatio**). Finally, contrary to death Christianity sets out God, who raises from the death (**Resurrectio**). Christianity sets out the ground of all being, the infinity contrary to the infinite power of non-being. It is obvious that the Apostolic Creed also follows this trichotomy. Christianity proclaims extremely focused counterpoints against the breaking points of non-being.

How could preaching connect to this religious concern?

Returning to the original question: what will make preaching relevant? What does religious phenomenology have to do with preaching at all? The starting hypothesis was, that the present religious practice is not in connection to people's religious concern, and so they are not participating in it. Tightening it to preaching: preaching seems to be not relevant for people, this is why they are not participating in the Sunday service. However, people are not unconcerned about their existence. People are concerned about their existential questions, which are religious ones. These can be summarized like this: **how can I have victory over the manifestations of non-being?** The preaching will be relevant not by filling it up with life situations, but by reflecting on the religious situation, where someone stands the swallowing power of non-being asking: **how can I have victory over this?**

The language of this study is abstract. Yet, the preaching is not allowed to use abstract language to describe the existential, religious situation of the man considering that the religions themselves never use abstract language but a symbolic one. In a symbolic language, the religions are reflecting the existential questions of man.

Bible too - by its religious essence - is reflecting these very questions. Bible is expressing exactly that in a particular historical situation how Yahweh's people experienced the redemption of Yahweh from non-being.

As the Bible itself reveals an existential message, so the preaching has to reveal an existential message too.

The critical question, in a homiletical sense, is if the hermeneutics, the text-perception of the preacher can determine the existential message of the text and the existential situation to which it replies. In this approach, preaching can be perceived as a counterpointing operation contrary to the points of non-being.

In this present study, we wrote about non-existence as an independent entity as if it existed. But non-existence is not existing, but it manifests itself as if it would exist, but it would not be possible in itself, without the conditions of existence. Non-existence can manifest itself only within the conditions of existence. It manifests in the life of people and manifests in the text too. The task is to determine its manifestation in the text and then counterpointing it by determining the manifestation of being, God, which cannot be defeated by death, or if so, raises from it, and so the final victory will be his.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [1] Tillich, Paul: *Dynamics of Faith*, Harper, New York, 1958.
- [2] Tillich, Paul: *Courage to Be*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1980.
- [3] Tillich, Paul: *Systematic Theology*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2011.
- [4] Tillich, Paul: *The Religious Situation*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1932.