

# Politics and Faith (2)\*

## Política e Fé (2)

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Review of Ronald Stone's Book: Politics and Faith<sup>1</sup>  
Resenha do livro de Ronald Stone: Política e fé

Ron Stone has packed an enormous amount of material into this volume about Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich. I commend him for his industry and research. As it happens, he has written an encyclopedia. Details from published books, lectures, and personal conversations have been gathered from a variety of mostly contemporary sources. Unfortunately, his wish to interview me was not fulfilled. Stone alternates between quoting the many facts and observations he has gathered, simultaneously debating with others, sometimes asserting his own point of view. Each chapter begins with biographical material about each thinker, followed by a description of the work being done at the time, in the midst of the political situation, the wars, the major events of the time. Although Stone has gathered an enormous amount of information and presents fact after fact, he fails to deliver "the inner man." Perhaps that is asking too much. For only Tillich wrote about his inner life, often in veiled terminology, and Niebuhr when he did write concentrated on outer events. Thus, a special part of these very different

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<sup>1</sup> *Politics and Faith: Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich at Union Seminary in New York* Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2013. (Mercer Tillich Series)

but greatly influential thinkers is missing. And that something goes beyond motivation. I hope this is not seen as too severe an indictment. Stone, after all, has not sought to do the work of a biographer but rather, as I see it, he has collected as much fact and contemporary observation as possible. This works well for the most part. And I admire Stone greatly for his industry.

At times, however, Stone rejects the very point made by reliable witnesses, e.g., in his interview with Elisabeth Niebuhr Sifton, he quotes her as saying that RN and PT were friends but not intimate friends. He then writes that Ms. Sifton *meant* to say they were close friends. Knowing Ms. Sifton intimately, I dare to suggest that she said what she meant to say, and nothing more or less. Yet, again and again, Stone points out that Tillich and Niebuhr were close friends. In fact, Tillich thought of Niebuhr as his savior from certain imprisonment and death by the Nazis. He was always a little bit in awe of Niebuhr who was a true American at home in this country; moreover, he was a most faithful human being, faithful to his family, to his friends, to his students. There was a certain amount of awe in Tillich's attitude towards Niebuhr. He was also in awe of Henry Sloane Coffin, who was president of Union Theological Seminary until 1945. He therefore attended chapel every morning although he was used to life in a secular university. And consequently, he rarely attended a Sunday morning service unless he himself was preaching.

In fact, Reinhold Niebuhr knew very little about Tillich's personal life until a dramatic event occurred during Tillich's last year at Harvard University when an irate husband called to tell him that the great Paul Tillich had written love letters to his wife. This gentleman banged on Tillich's office door and threatened him unless he left his wife alone. And then he visited Niebuhr and expressed his outrage. Niebuhr was taken by stunning surprise and immediately telephoned Wilhelm Pauck, who, while the two were taking a long walk on Riverside Drive, enlightened Niebuhr. It was Pauck who was Tillich's close friend and who kept his secrets. (As, of course, was Adolf Löwe.) There is no doubt that Niebuhr's views of Tillich the private person were dramatically changed by this event. Nevertheless, to my knowledge, he never confronted Tillich directly. Despite Pauck's own misgivings

about Tillich's life style, he also remained his loyal friend. It is true, however, that had Tillich's goings-on been made public, let us say, long before *The Courage to Be* was published, he might very well have been sacked. Tillich lived in constant anxiety but could not change.

Who among us is perfect? In the chapter about Hannah's book and the general reaction to it, Stone quotes the feminists at great length. And he himself makes what I consider a weak defense of Tillich. Had he re-read the chapter, titled "Between Two Worlds," of our biography of Tillich he would have found Tillich's own argument for his lifestyle. Tillich knew himself better than most anyone else, certainly better than his detractors. The fact is that the United States of America was then, and continues to be, torn between pornography and Puritanism. This was true when I was very young, and it is true now. Regard the front page of *The New York Times*, which carries a photograph of an old, defeated looking black actor/comedian, who has been accused of dalliances with women and the rape of at least one. Is this bit of news as important as the fact that many Americans are without food and shelter in a time of great prosperity? Or that ISIS is beheading its captives? Please do not misunderstand me. I certainly do not approve of rape nor do I applaud extra-marital affairs. But are we all so perfect that we dare to be excessively judgmental about sins of the flesh? I am reminded of Jesus' words, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone."

Tillich's inner struggle with his life style is reflected in a sermon titled "You Are Accepted." I recall hearing it when he first delivered it at Union in James Chapel. On the top of the manuscript itself, he wrote the words, "For Myself! 20 August 1946." It was his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. He writes, "...It strikes us when, year after year, the longed for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joys and darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying, 'You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you...'"

When Stone says that Tillich's reputation never recovered from the confessions of Hannah and the discussion that followed them, I take issue with him. Hannah herself told Wilhelm and me a few years after her book was published that she regretted writing it and regretted even more publishing it. The fact is, however, that so many

years later, Tillich's books are still bestsellers, and he is still considered as one of the most creative minds of the last century. Moreover, our biography of Tillich is being published again by Wipf and Stock. I teach a course at Stanford in my little Lutheran church, and it is crowded with eager adult students when we read and study Tillich. Professor Parrella teaches courses on Tillich as do many in the society. Even my physicians at the Palo Alto Medical Clinic eagerly read Tillich not only because of my connection to him but because they are in need of words that inspire them and keep them from being preoccupied with death. Tillich's words about his inner struggle have the ring of truth. Please do not think that I am unsympathetic to the feminist cause, although my own professional experience has been unusually free from male opposition. My teachers at Union were all men, and they were all supportive. I was the first woman to be religious book editor at the Oxford University Press. I spent nearly ten productive and interesting years working there until I was offered the chance to work on the Tillich biography. To be sure, I had difficulties with my immediate superior who was a man, but I managed to escape him. Immediately after I left Oxford University Press, I was offered an executive position in another prestigious book publishing firm. Moreover, the vice president of the *New York Times* interviewed me and put me on the short list to be the first religion editor/columnist for the *Times*. My marriage to Wilhelm Pauck prevented me from accepting that grand offer for I was told I would belong to the *New York Times* "body and soul." And my body and soul already belonged to Pauck.

Stone, unfortunately, fails to quote those who understood Tillich's views on love and marriage. Rather he quotes those who express typical American puritanical views. Personally, I do not applaud Tillich's *modus vivendi*, but as a biographer I try to understand him and, as a native American of German-born parents, I probably have a better chance. At least I do not condemn him wholesale. Tillich's mistake doubtless was that he exported a lifestyle that was acceptable in post-World War One Europe but not in the United States. There is a sense, finally, which made it impossible for him psychologically speaking to return to what he felt was a prison. Those of us who cared about him do not applaud

this behavior, but although we do not imitate his lifestyle, we do not condemn him.

Both in my biographical work and in various lectures delivered throughout the years, I have emphasized my knowledge of Paul Tillich. I have written much less about my other teacher and close friend, Reinhold Niebuhr. I have asked myself why this is the case. The answer is that I was afraid of sounding as though I worshipped him. And he would not have liked that. He knew very well in what high esteem I held him. Once when I criticized Roger Shinn for being too critical in a book review of one of Niebuhr's last books, Niebuhr teased me and said, "Marion, you are prejudiced." And we, Ursula, Wilhelm, and I, all burst out laughing. Yes, I was and am prejudiced. But the fact is that Niebuhr's character seemed to be without the kind of inner conflict that Tillich bore. It is true that he suffered from another kind of conflict that had to do with the strokes that stopped him in his tracks. But this conflict was not the same as Tillich's, in either content or substance. Niebuhr was absolutely straight and honest. He also gave the impression of seeing right through human frailties and dishonesties. I worked for him for two years as managing editor of *Christianity and Crisis*, and I saw him nearly every day. I recall treating him as though he had not been struck down and weakened. And I was told he was grateful to me for just that sensitivity towards him. Although I had met his wife, Ursula, in my years at Barnard College, I was a philosophy major and I failed to take any of her courses. But we knew and liked one another. When she heard that I wanted to take a Master's degree at Union but that my father had threatened to disown me, she was instrumental in helping me face up to him. She arranged a meeting between Reinhold Niebuhr and me. I have written about this meeting before and how impressed I was that such a great and busy man had saved time for me, serving tea in the bargain. He gave me "the courage to be" myself and to say "No" to my father. When I recall that he said, he understood what German fathers were like, and I understood why he gave me such good advice.

When Wilhelm and I were married, Reinhold Niebuhr was best man, and Paul Tillich the officiating minister. We had wanted Niebuhr to officiate, but he was too shaky on his feet. So he said, "Bill, I have

never been best man. I would like to do that very much indeed.” On our wedding day, therefore, in the little room outside the chapel where we were married, Niebuhr and Tillich, while they waited for the wedding march to begin, discussed the life eternal. Later Wilhelm told me that Niebuhr said, “I doubt the life eternal. I just don’t believe in it!” And Tillich responded, “I am uncertain and a little afraid.” This conversation continued at the wedding luncheon that followed the wedding. A few days later, Niebuhr said to Wilhelm in a wonderful letter thanking him for having invited him to be best man, “Marion is a good woman. You will be happy together.” No ifs, ands, and buts, no psychological problems, just “you will be happy.” A few months after our wedding, Tillich came to New York, and tele- phoned. Wilhelm answered. Tillich asked in German, “How are you two?” Wilhelm said, “Wonderful. We are very happy.” Then Tillich asked, “And Marion? How is she?” And Wilhelm said, “She is happy, too.” Whereupon Tillich replied, “Oh but that is so rare! That is wonderful.”

Although I have told these stories in earlier lectures, I find that they illustrate so perfectly the personality and character of both men. And they do so more than any long lecture or book with footnotes could possibly achieve.

I wish to thank you for inviting me to take part in this discussion. My criticisms should not remove anyone’s pleasure in reading Stone’s book. I am only sorry that I shall miss the discussion in San Diego, not to mention a walk by the ocean for both are bound to be lively. Warm greetings to you all!