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A Study of Onto-theology in Niebuhr and Tillich

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니버와 톨리히의 존재론적 신학

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기술의 발달과 함께 찾아온 인류세의 시대에 전존재가 위기를 경험하고 있다. 본 논문은 이러한 위기에 답변하기 위해서 존재론적 신학의 관점에서 니버와 톨리히를 신학적 윤리를 탐구한다. 니버와 톨리히는 신학적 인간학의 관점에서 인간 주체성에 대한 현대적 이해를 시도하면서, 인간 주체성에 대한 이해가 자아에 대한 개인적 인식의 지위에 머물러서는 안 되며, 관계성으로 확장되어야 한다고 주장하였다. 니버는 개인화(Individuation)와 관련된 신학적 윤리를 전개하였으며, 톨리히는 참여(Participation)에 대한 신학적 사고를 전개하였다. 본 연구는 이 두 신학자의 개인화와 참여의 과정에 대한 논의를 구체적으로 탐구한다. 마지막으로 두 신학자는 모두 신적 사랑인 아가페를 그들의 윤리 개념의 근거로 제시하면서 사랑의 윤리학을 발전시킨다. 이 연구는 두 신학자의 개인화, 참여 개념, 사랑(아가페)의 윤리적 의미를 탐구하면서 존재론적 신학을 연구한다.

주제어: 존재론적 신학, 개인화, 참여, 사랑의 윤리, 니버, 톨리히

I. Introduction

The climate crisis warns humanity to have a period of another mass extinction called the Anthropocene. Under this circumstance, this research asks again the meaning of being with the Christian ethical perspectives, concentrating on Niebuhr and Tillich. Since Niebuhr supported Tillich in settling down in the U.S. from the dictatorship of Nazi Germany to Union Theological Seminary, they developed their friendship and shared their theological thoughts. In particular, they resonated with their theological views, such as freedom, anxiety, sin, estrangement, and inevitability.¹⁾ They developed their social-ethical thoughts regarding the issue of power and justice, concentrating on human existences and social relationships.²⁾ To figure out the meaning of existence in Christian ethics, this research delves into the ontological and ethical perspectives of Niebuhr and Tillich.

Niebuhr and Tillich begin their works with this modern understanding of humanity related to the issue of human subjectivity. Both theologians also developed their theological thought that the issue of human subjectivity should not stay in the status of individual awareness of the self. Still, it should be broadened to the realm of human ethics-relatedness. Niebuhr develops his theology and ethics regarding individuation, whereas Tillich develops his theological thoughts on

1) Adam Pryor, "Paul Tillich," in *The Oxford Handbook of Reinhold Niebuhr*, eds., Robin Lovin and Joshua Mauldin, (London: Oxford University Press, 2021), 163-180.

2) Jack Keller Jr., "Niebuhr, Tillich and Whitehead on the Ethics of Power." *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy*. Vol. 7, no.3., 1993, eller, 1986, 133-139.

participation. Interestingly, both theologians base their conclusive ideas of ethics on the doctrine of divine love, *agape*. I will demonstrate the differences between theologians' concepts of individuation and participation regarding their understanding of human subjectivity and their ethical understanding of *agape*.

II. Niebuhr and Individuation

The crux of Niebuhr's understanding of human beings is creatureliness and self-transcendence, which is based upon acknowledging individuality and subjectivity. Niebuhr analyzes this issue of the polarities as he examines various traditions like Greco-Roman classical philosophical thought, Christian thought, and modern belief, such as the superiority of spirit over the body, creatureliness with finiteness, the unity of body and soul with the image of God, the vitality of nature, and reason to form and unite of nature. Niebuhr distinguishes his theological anthropology from traditional theological anthropology, especially the Augustinian thinking that human sin originates in pride and that human beings need to receive the grace of God to attain the eternal felicity which they live in a twofold life of this world between the earthly and the heavenly kingdoms. Niebuhr develops that humanity also has creatureliness and a sense of the image of God. He argues that humans have the initial structure of righteousness and can enjoy felicity because they still contain God's image from the world's creation to the present despite their sinfulness. Thus, Niebuhr is assertive of human transcendence and creativity regarding individuality and subjectivity.

Niebuhr bases his ethical thoughts on theological anthropology; capability and incapability; illusions and self-deception; and possibilities and the limits of human beings. Humans' "own most vexing problem" is their thinking of themselves.³⁾ Niebuhr tries to answer this fundamental question by forming a theological anthropology that describes humans as existing in a very paradoxical situation related to the dialectical experiences of humans: human limitedness and freedom; finitude and transcendence; vitality and form; nature and spirit; and sinfulness and containment of the image of God. Niebuhr says, "the individual is conceived of as a creature of infinite possibilities which cannot be fulfilled within this temporal existence."⁴⁾

Niebuhr demonstrates the self-consciousness and creatureliness of human beings with two important biblical views of human beings, creatureliness, and finiteness in terms of the notion of "body and spirit" and the "image of God."⁵⁾ Human consciousness is the competence to understand the world and the self. The process of self-consciousness is related to the formation of transcendence. The self gradually recognizes human beings' self as a subject, not an object, when they encounter the world. When humanity explore the value of transcendence, the spirit acknowledges "the divine ground of existence," namely God, as "the only possible ground of real individuality."⁶⁾ As the conceiver of the

3) Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man. vol. I.* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1941, 1964 and 1991), 1.

4) *Ibid.*, 170.

5) *Ibid.*, 12-13.

6) *Ibid.*, 14-15.

image of God, human beings recognize their creatureliness as they acknowledge that they are sinners. Sin is the pride that human beings “pretend to be more than” they are. “Sin is occasioned precisely by the fact that man refuses to admit his “creatureliness” and to acknowledge himself as merely a member of a total unity of life.” In other words, “man is a sinner not because he is one limited individual within a whole but rather because he is betrayed by his ability to survey the whole to imagine himself the whole.” In this way, humans contradict themselves with the true essence of “free self-determination” as an individual. Finally, humans violate the law of love, which is “the source of life” and “the divine center.”⁷⁾

Niebuhr elaborates, “Christianity is responsible for a heightened sense of individuality because, according to the Christian faith, the human spirit in its freedom is finally bound only by the will of God, and the secret of its heart is only fully known and judged by the divine wisdom.”⁸⁾ This Christian perception of individuality supports humans to develop a very specific relationship with God, which Niebuhr calls “the individual responsibility to God.”⁹⁾ For example, Protestant Christianity emphasized individuality with the concept of the “priesthood of all believers.” This idea highlights the importance of each individual’s direct response to God for forgiveness of their sins, assured by God’s mercy. This belief also calls for Christians to reject legalism — not due to the ineffectiveness of the legal system, but because of

7) Ibid., 16-17.

8) Ibid., 57.

9) Ibid., 60.

the profound sense of each individual's immediate responsibility to God. In other words, "the individual faces the daunting responsibility of seeking to do God's will amid the complexities of human existence, with no other authoritative norm but that ultimate one."¹⁰⁾

The Christian doctrine of the goodness of creation emphasizes the importance of individuality in the thought of Niebuhr. Salvation does not entail the complete destruction of creatureliness or absorption into the divine; rather, the Christian understanding of creaturely goodness highlights the significance of individuality.¹¹⁾ While individuality is limited and finite, this finiteness should not be viewed as evil. Instead, it should be recognized as an opportunity for transcendence through self-consciousness and the integration of the limited and the unlimited. The self can come to realize that self-consciousness and self-transcendence are possible only in relation to God. Niebuhr argues that individuals can differentiate their subjectivity from their sinful nature through an ongoing process of self-awareness and self-transcendence. For example:

Here the self as the ultimate subject looks at the sinful self and declares that it is not itself. It is "not I . . . but sin." *The "I," which from the perspective of self-transcendence, regards the sinful self not as self but as "sin," is the same "I" which from the perspective of sinful action regards the transcendent possibilities of the self as not the self but as "law." It is the same self; but these changing perspectives are obviously significant* (Niebuhr, 1941,

10) Ibid.

11) Ibid., 170.

pp. 278-279).¹²⁾

In this way, Niebuhr applies the Christian perspective of creaturely goodness to his anthropology to explain human existence.

The connection to God encourages human beings to develop themselves toward becoming subjects, with the concept of subjectivity as the central theme of Niebuhr's ethics, termed individuation. Remembering original righteousness does not imply that humans can achieve perfection. Rather, the realization of oneself as a transcendent being allows individuals to recognize their actions as subjects and to understand the virtue embodied in those actions. This awareness also helps people view themselves beyond the constraints of history, keeping in mind the concept of original righteousness.¹³⁾ Niebuhr argues that Christian ethics stands apart from other ethical systems because it emphasizes self-transcendence in relation to the Christian life and human actions that connect to original righteousness, rather than any form of perfectionism within historical contexts.¹⁴⁾ In this way, Niebuhr illustrates that individuals can become "the self" when they acknowledge their transcendence, as the transcendental self is in a position to discern the meaning of the self. Only through the process of transcendence can human beings be drawn toward original righteousness. Thus, it is only the transcendental self that can recognize itself as a sinner, and only

12) Ibid., 278-279.

13) Ibid., 277-280.

14) Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, (New York: Living Age Books, 1956), 13-39.

then can individuals grasp the significance of the self,¹⁵⁾ The transcendental self values its original righteousness and its relationship with God as integral to its true identity. This concept of subjectivity enables human beings to find balance between the dynamics of the worldly and the ultimate eternity. Therefore, the process of self-consciousness represents the path of individuation. Individuation serves as the foundation of humanity's moral goodness because, through it, individuals come to realize their potential for transcendence through the love of God.

III. Tillich and Participation

In Tillich, ontology is not only an acknowledgment or recognition of individuality and subjectivity but also the process of self-affirmation based on “the power of resisting nonbeing.” Tillich has an ultimate concern of theology and philosophy, that is, the question of ontology, which comes from “the shock of possible nonbeing” and the imagination of “the negation of everything.”¹⁶⁾ The basic structure of beings is the subject-object distinction of being. It has the presupposition of the system of self and world. There are several pairs of polarity in the essential elements of this structure: individuality and participation, dynamics and form, freedom and destiny. The characteristics of these elements are the expressions of “the power of being to exist and the difference between essential and existential being.” The categories of being

15) Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. vol. I, 278-279.

16) Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol I. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951, 1973), 163-164.

are based on “the nature of finitude,” so-called the “structures of finite being and thinking.” Tillich suggests four main categories to demonstrate his theological works: time, space, causality, and substance.¹⁷⁾ Based on this analysis, he articulates that ontology is the self-affirmation process to resist the negation of being through the power of non-being.

Ontology begins the reasoning process of objectivity, and then, beings can get the notion of subjectivity. Tillich asks, “What precedes the duality of self and world, of subject and object?”¹⁸⁾ He answers this question by demonstrating the elements of being in the polarity of individuation and participation. Once beings are individualized, participation follows inevitably as such, “when individualization reaches the perfect form which we call a “person,” participation reaches the perfect form which we call “communion.” Communion is participation in another completely centered and completely individual self. In this sense, communion is not something an individual might or might not have. Participation is essential for the individual, not accidental. Individuation and participation are interdependent on all levels of being.”¹⁹⁾ He says more resolutely, “The element of participation guarantees the unity of a disrupted world and makes a universal system of relations possible.”²⁰⁾

This polarity of individuation and participation shows us the “special and general forms” of being.²¹⁾ So, the polarity of this form is the dy-

17) Ibid., 165-166.

18) Ibid., 174.

19) Ibid., 176-177.

20) Ibid., 177.

21) Ibid., 178.

namics of being. Beings are living in this form as he creates the dynamics of being. Dynamics is the vitality of being for life with “self-transcendence” and “self-conservation.” Beings have the “intentionality” of life in terms of energy; the vitality makes beings pursue self-transcendence, and the self-transcendence goes along with the continuity of life, the self-conservation.²²⁾ Besides, according to his understanding of the polarity of freedom and destiny, beings with dynamics ask about the meaning of freedom and destiny. These two are not separated from each other, but they have the same implication of ontology. We may misunderstand that both are opposing because destiny is about what will happen into being, so there is no freedom in destiny. Yet, Tillich argues that freedom is “not the freedom of a function (the “will”).” Still, it is the participation in freedom with the experience of “deliberation, decision, and responsibility.”²³⁾ He shows a straightforward example of the relationship between freedom and destiny. “Things have no destiny because those have no freedom.” Likewise, “God has no destiny because he is freedom.”²⁴⁾ We can read that only beings can understand the polarity of freedom and destiny because beings are in the ontological structure through this paradoxical example. Truly, beings have freedom because they are not materials; simultaneously, beings have destiny because they are not transcendental.

The question of finitude develops the question of ontological characteristics because the question of finitude “is produced by the “shock

22) Ibid., 180-181.

23) Ibid., 183-184.

24) Ibid., 185.

of nonbeing”.²⁵⁾ “Being is essentially related to nonbeing” in that “being is essentially threatened with disruption and self-destruction.” We can find this essentiality of being from “the tension between the ontological elements,” coming from the polarity of being and nonbeing.²⁶⁾ At this point, there is no distinction between the essence and the existence of ontology. The existential stance of being is based on the shock of nonbeing, and simultaneously, the essence of being is related to the finitude of being. For instance, the categories of ontology — time, space, causality, and substance — tell us clearly about these ontological characteristics related to the ontological structure and the ontological elements. Time, “the central category of finitude,” makes us aware of the temporality of being and helps us bear the ontological courage to be. Space is “an ontological necessity” because it becomes our present-ness; we have to have a sense of security as being. Causality can make us catch the meaning of being and non-being, especially “the abyss of nonbeing,” to express the cause and effect of ontology. Substance tells about the belongingness of being. The meaning is something that we encounter in our reality at present. We may inevitably be anxious about the importance of being because of the finitude; yet, paradoxically, this anxiety of finitude helps us to have the courage to be.²⁷⁾

To resist the power of nonbeing, we must have the courage to be.

25) Ibid., 186.

26) Ibid., 202.

27) Ibid., 193-198.

This courage is tied to becoming part of something larger. The idea of “being a part” may initially seem to reflect a lack of courage; however, it is at the heart of the courage to be. It demands self-affirmation as the foundation of this courage:

Self-affirmation as a part requires courage as much as does self-affirmation as oneself. It is *one* courage which takes a double threat of nonbeing into itself. The courage to be is essentially always the courage to be as a part and be as oneself, in interdependence.”²⁸⁾

Thus, affirming oneself requires just as much bravery as affirming one’s individual identity. Self-affirmation as an individual always includes the acknowledgment of one’s role as a participant. This is not only because of the courage to assert oneself, but also due to the recognition of self through the courage to be part of something greater. Therefore, the courage to affirm oneself is expressed through the courage to be part of a larger whole.

The concept of “the courage to be” highlights individual momentum as part of the self-affirmation process, emphasizing that our identities are interconnected with others. In essence, someone who dares to embrace their individuality also affirms their place within the community. This self-affirmation contributes to the affirmation of the community as a whole. When individuals regularly engage with one another, they create a community where they can recognize their belonging. This recog-

28) Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 89-90.

tion fosters a sense of “self-relatedness.”²⁹⁾ Similarly, personal encounters with others enable individuals to grow within the “communion” that these interactions create, underscoring our interdependence as beings. Tillich summarizes this idea by stating that

When individualization reaches the perfect form which we call a “person,” participation reaches the perfect form which we call “communion.” Man participates in all levels of life, but he participates fully only in that level of life in which he is himself—he has communion only with persons. Communion is participation in another completely centered and individual self.³⁰⁾

Moreover, Tillich expands on his thoughts regarding morality and ethics in relation to participation. A moral experience occurs when one person encounters another in a genuine manner, allowing individuals to affirm their worth through these personal interactions. The person-to-person encounter serves as the foundational experience of morality, forming the basis for all moral decisions and actions.³¹⁾ Each being carries ethical implications, striving to become a living entity within a community of beings. A moral act is aligned with “the inner law of our true being” — our essential nature — which compels us to actualize our potential.³²⁾ Morality thus becomes an expression of self-affirmation and the practice of freedom, as we encourage ourselves to realize our

29) Ibid., 90-91.

30) Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol I., 176.

31) Paul Tillich, *Morality and Beyond*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 36-45.

32) Ibid., 20.

truest selves in light of moral principles. The moral act fosters “self-actualization” by countering any “disintegrating forces” that may threaten our freedom. It enables individuals to achieve victory through the “process of self-integration.”³³⁾ Ultimately, the moral act allows people to love themselves — not from the standpoint of “wrong self-love,” which manifests as selfishness, but from a place of “right self-love,” which is rooted in authentic “self-acceptance.”³⁴⁾

Likewise, Tillich distinguishes moralism and morality to explain the absoluteness of morality related to self-affirmation. Morality is such the “pure form of essential self-affirmation” so that it is absolute and unconditional, whereas “moralism” is “relative” because it is based on the “acknowledgment of man’s finitude and his dependence on the contingencies of time and space.”³⁵⁾ Several forms of moralism relate to the systems of ethical rules: moralism of authority, law, and justice. Under the control of moralism, people can live safely because safety is the innate character of all charges, and obedience guarantees safety. However, there is no self-affirmation under the authority in that safety cannot make people live “in the unsafety of risk and courage” that is the basis of morality.³⁶⁾ The laws of moralism give us rewards and punishments, but the ought-to-be of moralism cannot give us the grace of morality. We cannot experience the “forgiveness of sins” and the “entering into the new being” under the guidance of the moralism of

33) Ibid., 20-21.

34) Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 144-145.

35) Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 137.

36) Ibid., 141.

the law.³⁷⁾ The justice of moralism gives us a simple legal principle, like proportionality. Still, it cannot show us the love of morality through which it can embrace the justice of moralism. Love is the unique power that can “transform the moralism of authority into a morality of risk,” be the “source of grace,” and include justice” to make justice just for others.³⁸⁾

IV. Individuation, Participation, and Love

In Niebuhr’s view, the Christian doctrine of love illustrates the potential for the individuation of human beings, as “love is not only a fruit of grace, but it is also a fruit of faith” in terms of moral possibilities.³⁹⁾ Christian faith in God signifies a belief in “the transcendent unity of essence and existence” in both the ideal and natural worlds, which form the foundation of the “law of God.” This love “implies an uncoerced giving of the self to the object of its devotion,” and it is through this perfect transcendental love that the law is fulfilled.⁴⁰⁾ Love does not force the self to conform to societal expectations or intellectual ideals. Rather, self-transcendence through love allows us to engage in self-giving love, which reveals the path to individuation. Thus, self-giving love, as presented in the Christian doctrine, demonstrates how individuation can be achieved through self-awareness and the capacity to give oneself to others.

37) Ibid., 142.

38) Ibid., 144-145.

39) Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 195.

40) Ibid., 188.

Furthermore, forgiving-love in the Christian tradition offers another means for individuals to recognize their subjectivity in the world. Niebuhr emphasizes the doctrine of forgiveness as “the crown of Christian ethics,” asserting that forgiving love represents “the most difficult and impossible of moral achievements.”⁴¹⁾ Forgiving-love is attainable only when the individual admits to being a sinner. In this sense, Niebuhr asserts that “forgiveness is a moral achievement which is possible only when it is transcended.”⁴²⁾ The possibility of forgiving-love encourages individuals to reject their self-righteousness or pride — sources of sin — and fosters tolerance and acceptance of others within their community or society.

Furthermore, the sacrificial love of the Christian tradition, called *agape*, shows us the acme of the Christian doctrine of love through the epitome of self-giving love and forgiving-love. Sacrificial love is the paramount form of self-transcendence and self-giving love in that it goes beyond the natural moral standard limited by human existence in history. Niebuhr uses two Greek words of love, *eros*, and *agape*, as he develops his idea of mutual and sacrificial love. The highest good of history is mutual love in that “the concern of one person for the interests of another prompts and elicits a reciprocal affection.”⁴³⁾ We can figure out the significance of life in social realms based on mutual love. Mutuality is impossible because humans act according to their intentions

41) Ibid., 201.

42) Ibid.

43) Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man. vol. II.* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1943, 1964 and 1991), 69.

and goals. Paradoxically, sacrificial love is related to mutual love because of the relatedness between the historical impossibility of mutuality and the eternal concern of sacrificial love.⁴⁴⁾ Here is the standpoint of Niebuhr's dialectics of sacrificial love and mutual love as such:

Sacrificial love (*agape*) completes the incompleteness of mutual love (*eros*), for the latter is always arrested because it seeks to relate life to life from the standpoint of the self and for the sake of the self's happiness. But a self which seeks to measure the possible reciprocity which its love towards another may elicit is not sufficiently free of preoccupation with self to lose itself in the life of the other.⁴⁵⁾

Therefore, Niebuhr emphasizes the will of God in that God reveals in Christ the ultimate formation of love, *agape*, to show the ethical norm of the Christian life as such, "The highest unity is a harmony of love in which the self relates to itself in its freedom to other selves in their freedom under the will of God."⁴⁶⁾

Niebuhr expands on his social-ethical ideas of "Christian realism" through an analysis of individuals and the ideal of love. Christian realism reflects the Christian way of life and social ethics, emphasizing concepts such as equality, justice, balance of power, and peace. Interestingly, Niebuhr's Christian realism and social ethics do not stem from a notion of collectivism; rather, they are rooted in individuality,

44) Ibid.

45) Ibid., 82.

46) Ibid., 95.

which is influenced by “the pervasive rule of self-interest” and individuals’ “attentiveness to all of the realities at work in social change and conflict.”⁴⁷⁾ The relationship between the self and community is complex and can be understood in two dimensions: vertical and horizontal. Individuals interact with others and their communities in the horizontal dimension. While they may seek to expand their community, they sometimes experience individual emancipation or transcendence through a sense of loyalty. At other times, they may succumb to extreme collectivism or collective pride, which can lead to totalitarianism.⁴⁸⁾ This dynamic can create feelings of both frustration and fulfillment regarding one’s community in the vertical dimension. Furthermore, individuals often view their community as “the fulfillment of their lives and the sustainer of their existence.” Human reason can recognize the “concrete universality” of the individual within the community, both morally and physically.⁴⁹⁾ However, the moral ideals of individuals, which advocate for the sharing of self-interest with others, often clash with communal moral standards. Niebuhr highlights this issue by noting that “looking down at the community from his height, the individual is em-

47) Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. vol. I., xi. Robin W. Lovin defines Christian realism in his introduction of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* on page xiv as following: “Christian Realism” is more than a set of opinions on the issues of the day. It is a synthesis of political, moral, and theological reflection, in which the undeniability of human freedom and the inescapability of its limits are the twin realities that together form a framework for understanding both the multiplicity of our specific choices and the ultimate unity of the environment in which they all take place.

48) Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Self and the Dramas of History*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1955), 38-39.

49) *Ibid.*, 35.

barrassed by the difference between the moral standards of the community and his own.”⁵⁰⁾ Consequently, “the community will always remain both the fulfillment and the frustration of the individual.”⁵¹⁾

Whereas Tillich developed key ethical topics using the theological concepts of agape and theonomous morality in relation to divine participation, a primary characteristic of God, Jesus, and the Spirit is their participation as a triune God in the lives of beings.⁵²⁾ Divine participation is fundamentally related to encounters that involve ethical demands. In Tillich’s view, God serves as the principle of both participation and individuation.⁵³⁾ Divine creativity represents God’s involvement in history. God is symbolized as both the ground of being and being itself, where the true symbol partakes in reality:

The divine life participates in every life as its ground and aim. God participates in everything that is; he has a community with it; he shares in its destiny. Certainly, such statements are highly symbolic. ... While active religious communication between God and man depends on the symbol of the personal God, the symbol of universal participation expresses the passive experience of the divine *parousia* in terms of the divine omnipresence.⁵⁴⁾

50) Ibid.

51) Ibid., 36.

52) Tillich emphasizes the importance of autonomous ethics and morality from Kant’s perspective. However, freedom has limitations, called destiny, influenced the power of non-being. As a way to overcome these limitations, Tillich proposes theonomous morality based on the notion of love of God, *agape*.

53) Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol I., 245.

54) Ibid.

Furthermore, divine participation serves as the power to resist non-being and the existential estrangement associated with the concept of the “New Being,” particularly as it applies to Jesus as the Christ. Tillich explains, “To experience the New Being in Jesus as the Christ means to experience the power in Him who has conquered existential estrangement, both in Himself and in everyone who participates in Him, ‘Being,’ when applied to God or divine manifestations, represents the power of being, or, negatively expressed, the power to overcome non-being.”⁵⁵⁾ The New Being possesses the power to negate non-being — not because it has the physical strength to defeat non-being but because it participates in the tragic aspects of existence in the world while resisting non-being.⁵⁶⁾

Besides, the divine participation of the Being-itself and the New Being in the world of beings demands morality and ethics on behalf of the Spiritual Community.⁵⁷⁾ To understand Tillich’s argument of this spiritual community, we need to be able to construe the relation between morality and the spirit that our self-actualization in our daily life is based on the function of the spirit. Tillich illustrates,

55) Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol I. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957, 1973), 125.

56) Ibid., 132-134.

57) Tillich explains Tillich uses the capital form of “the Spiritual Community” when he develops his thought of the Holy Spirit. The Spiritual Community is founded by the New Being in order that people can experience the Spiritual Presence through love, that is *agape*. On the other hand, Tillich also explains small “s” spirit, as an innate part of human beings who have received the Divine Spirit. The spirit of human beings is the basis of culture, morality and religion. In his book *Theology of Culture*, he claims, as the bearer of spirit, human beings can create culture, morality and religion.

Morality is the function of life by which the realm of the spirit comes into being. Morality is the constitutive function of the spirit. A moral act, therefore, is not an act in which some divine or human law is obeyed but an act in which life integrates itself in the dimension of spirit, which means as a community personality.⁵⁸⁾

Because of this relatedness between being and spirit, our encounter with others and the world, which is the basis of the foundation of community, is not a simple accidental happening in our lives. Based on this argument of morality and spirit in terms of community, Tillich develops his thought of the moral imperative in terms of *agape* in that acceptance of others is seen as the core of love, that is, *agape* since the moral imperative demands that the self participates in a community.⁵⁹⁾ Interestingly, love, *agape*, is the way to acknowledge Spiritual Presence because *agape* is unambiguous. Still, it is impossible that *agape* is given autonomously to individuals as the bearers of spirit.⁶⁰⁾ He exemplifies love as such, “Love is continually subject to change while remaining identical with itself as love. In the Spiritual Community, there are no tables of commandments besides the Spiritual Presence, which creates love and which may also create documents of the wisdom of love (as the Decalogue).”⁶¹⁾ Thus, the concept of *agape* leads us to acknowledge the ethical idea of Tillich, theonomous morality, on behalf of the Spiritual Community, which the New Being, the Christ, founds.

58) Tillich, *Morality and Beyond*, 38.

59) *Ibid.*, 45.

60) *Ibid.*, 135.

61) *Ibid.*, 160.

V. Conclusion

Both theologians started their theological thought from the human predicament of the first half of the twentieth century based on the ontological and anthropological interpretation of human subjectivity. Individuation in Niebuhr initiates from the self-awareness of their creatureliness and containment of the image of God, although human beings are finite beings because of sin. This individuation makes people acknowledge moral goodness not because they can become good by themselves but because they can see their relatedness to the love of God *agape*. Participation is a positive action to the possibility of the total negation of being because of the power of nonbeing. Tillich argues that the individuals who affirm themselves need the courage to become a part of resisting the power of nonbeing. Participation, becoming a part, is the assuring process of communion in human relations and the obtaining process of human morality that joins in the Spiritual Community through the love of God, *agape*. Thus, both theologians develop their theological and ethical thoughts based on their concepts of individuation and participation based on human subjectivity.

Furthermore, this theological and ethical interpretation of human subjectivity can broaden its perspective to post-modern knowledge of inter-subjectivity. Inter-subjectivity does not identify all human beings as “the same,” instead, it values differences of human beings as such that it guarantees inter-cultural conversation not to make people have the same identity but to help people understand the relatedness of human beings. Individuation should not become a tool to support individual

self-centeredness as modern philosophers did because the absolute self can not see the difference between individuals. The courage to become a part of that is participation, thus, occurs along with individuation and self-awareness. Both cannot happen at once, but they are not separated. Both have the same value, but participation embraces individuation. Both are based on human subjectivity, but they do value more inter-subjectivity. Understanding human subjectivity and inter-subjectivity has its foundation in understanding the relatedness of human beings.

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• ABSTRACT •

A Study of Onto-theology in Niebuhr and Tillich

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In the era of the Anthropocene, marked by significant technological development, all existence faces a crisis. This paper explores the theological ethics of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich through the lens of onto-theology to respond to this crisis. Both theologians sought to understand human subjectivity in a contemporary context, arguing that it should not be confined to individual self-recognition but should also encompass relationships. Niebuhr focused on theological ethics related to individuation, while Tillich emphasized theological thought on participation. This study explicitly investigates their discussions on the processes of individuation and participation. Ultimately, both theologians advocate for the ethics of love, presenting agape — divine love — as the foundation of their ethical concepts. This study examines onto-theology by exploring the concepts of individuation, participation, and the ethical implications of love (agape) as articulated by these two theologians.

Key words: Onto-theology, Individuation, Participation, Ethics of Love, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich
