

From the other side of doubt – overcoming anxiety and fear: Paul Tillich’s “courage to be” and Reinhold Niebuhr’s “Christian realism”

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Abstract

Paul Tillich’s view on reality is that anxiety is part of being human. According to Reinhold Niebuhr, Christian realism has a realistic and an idealistic side to it. Reality is always changing and filled with tension. On the other hand there is a vision of otherworldliness, a vision of transcendence in everydayness. The theological nomen “Christian” indicates an awareness of God’s presence as well as the human tendency to be self-directed. The objectives of this article are to “rephrase” Niebuhr’s knowledge of the reality of the secular world, conceptualise Tillich’s categories of “anxiety” and “fear” against the background of the reality of the secular world, and explain Niebuhr’s notion of “Christian realism”. Their insights are used to empower the church to overcome homophobia in the faith community’s pastoral care of gays.

1. INTRODUCTION

The crisis of our time is that of *meaninglessness*. Though this age is by far more prosperous than any preceding one, there remains at the heart of its culture a disquieting anxiety. This is drowned out by being very busy and doing endlessly. In his essay “Pleasure Spots” George Orwell (in Gomes 2000:xvii) describes it as follows:

The lights must never go out,
The music must always play,
Lest we should see where we are –
Lost in a haunted wood;
Children afraid of the dark
Who have never been happy or good.

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In the modern era religion has been reduced to “belief in the unbelievable” (Gomes 2000:xviii). Darwin, Freud and Marx have contributed to creating a world where it is possible to make do without religion. However, this did not bring about happiness and freedom of the control of religion. Rather it resulted in anxiety and a different kind of bondage – that of fear.

The certainties offered by traditional theology were discredited by the critical scrutiny of modernity and the uncertainty of postmodernity. “Easy answers” can no longer be accepted. Life has become complex and complicated. How does one believe in love in the face of hatred, in life in the face of death, in day when there is but darkness, in good in the face of evil? For Paul Tillich what is needed are *courage* and *faith*, and for Reinhold Niebuhr, peace which cannot be achieved. Faith is not “an impossible set of churchly pronouncements”, but it is “the courage to accept the *acceptance* of the unacceptable: namely oneself” (Gomes 2000:xxiv; my emphasis).

Peter Gomes (2000:xvi), who reads “with the eyes of a post-modern apologist for belief”, finds Tillich’s *The Courage to Be* not “dated, irrelevant, incomprehensible, or, in short, a period piece.” According to Gomes (2000:xxx) it “has even more to say at the start of a new century than it had at the midpoint of the last ... We would like to make a life and not just a living, which – as we know from our own experiences and that of others – takes courage”.

Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) helped to bring Paul Tillich (1886-1965) over from Nazi Germany to the United States shortly before the Second World War (Gomes 2000:xii). Both lectured at Union Theological Seminary in New York City – Niebuhr from 1928 to 1960 and Tillich from 1933 to 1955 when he left for Harvard and from there went to Chicago in 1962. Together Niebuhr and Tillich “commanded the theological heights in the late 1940s and the 1950s and were, in their different ways, certainly among the most prominent public intellectuals in the U S in that period” (Rasmussen 1989:14).

Paul Tillich’s (2000:32-63) view on reality is that anxiety is part of being human. Such a realism can lead to a constant despair. According to Reinhold Niebuhr ([1937] 1952:212) “every religion which imparts a superficial meaning to life, and grounds that meaning in dubious sanctity, finally issues in despair.” However, Niebuhr (1952:213) continues: “Christianity is a faith which takes us through tragedy to beyond tragedy.” He called this “Christian realism”. Anxiety manifested in different ways in different eras. The “answers” provided by the Christian faith are often deemed inaccessible or irrelevant. Tillich (2000:1-31) chose *courage* as the central concept in his discussion of the meaning of life. He considers this concept useful for an analysis of the human condition because in it theological, sociological and philosophical problems converge.

This article aims to explain Tillich's "courage to be" in light of Niebuhr's "Christian realism".

Tillich does not deny the reality in which we live. Both he and Niebuhr, however, deny the power of the *real* world over us. Tillich describes it as follows: "The courage to be is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt" (Tillich 2000:190). This is the "experience of grace" (Niebuhr [1943] [1971] 1989:167). According to Niebuhr (see Rasmussen 1989:21-22), Christian realism has a realistic and an idealistic side to it. Rasmussen (1989:21) describes this as follows: "Christian realism always meant the interplay of idealism and realism in Niebuhr's mind." Reality is always changing and filled with tension. On the other hand there is a vision of otherworldliness, a vision of transcendence in everydayness. The theological nomenclature "Christian" also carries this dialectic tension. It indicates a "realistic" perspective on human beings who tend to be more self-directed than other-directed. This tendency of self-directedness can be seen in all human communities. The other side of "Christian" is that of human beings created in the image of God. This image can be seen in the life of Jesus. The term "idealism" does not adequately describe this side of the Christian reality. Niebuhr thought dialectically and paradoxically. He never relaxed this tension between transcendence and everydayness in the midst of the *real* secular world. "He discerned and decided amidst the play of antinomies, one set of which was 'ideal/real'" (Rasmussen 1989:22).

Niebuhr did not focus so much on "theological method and careful definition of categories" and was therefore "not very precise about the framing of his own thought" (Rasmussen 1989:17). This was Tillich's strength. Larry Rasmussen (1989:17), Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary, tells the story of how Paul Tillich once scolded Niebuhr affectionately at a symposium held in his (Niebuhr's) honour: "Reinie never tells us how he knows; he just starts knowing!"

The objectives of this article are to "rephrase" Niebuhr's knowledge of the reality of the secular world, conceptualise Tillich's categories of "fear" and "anxiety" against the background of the reality of the secular world, and explain Niebuhr's notion of "Christian realism". Their insights are used to empower the church to overcome homophobia in the faith community's pastoral care of gays.

2. NIEBUHR'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE SECULAR WORLD

For Niebuhr ([1937] 1952:203) secularism is "the disavowal of the sacred". The holy is "that reality upon which all things depend, in terms of which they

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are explained and by which they are judged. It is the ultimate mystery, but also the ultimate source of all meaning” (Niebuhr 1952:203). In the Christian faith God’s grace, mediated through Jesus Christ, is essential to the world. Without it the world remains a problem to itself and cannot escape the contradictions of its own existence (Niebuhr 1952:204). Actually, there is no such thing as secularism. Niebuhr also has no faith in the existence of atheism. Every attempt at being completely secularised carries within it “some principle of explanation which cannot be explained” or “some criterion of value which cannot be arrived at empirically”. Either human reason or a vital force in the individual or community becomes the new god, that is “the object of unconditioned loyalty” (Niebuhr 1952:204-205).

Secularism is in actual fact the religion of self-glorification. Human reason which is a finite reality is made into a principle by means of which the meaning of life can be interpreted (Niebuhr 1952:206). This focus on autonomy and independence will eventually lead to impoverishment. When the meaning of life is interpreted in terms of the truths of human cultures, human beings will inevitably end up in the despair of meaninglessness (Niebuhr 1952:211). On the other hand those in despair can find new hope in the gospel message. “The God whom we worship takes the contradictions of human existence into [God self] ... [T]his is a wisdom beyond human knowledge but not contrary to human experience ... Through it we are able to understand life in all of its beauty and its terror, without being beguiled by its beauty or driven to despair by its terror” (Niebuhr 1952:213-214). The gospel message can help the world to overcome its despair caused by the “sad disillusionment into which the high hopes of modernity have issued” (Niebuhr 1952:226).

Paul Tillich also emphasised the power of faith. According to him, critical thinking of modernity did not succeed in killing God. Peter Gomes (2000:xxv) describes Tillich’s vision as follows: “In other words there is a God who emerges from the other side of doubt and from that God we take courage.”

3. TILlich’S CATEGORIES OF ANXIETY

The word “courage” is derived from the French *coeur*, heart. Courage (Afrikaans *moed*, German *Mut*) is central to one’s being. The courage or fortitude (Afrikaans *dapperheid*, German *Tapferkeit*) of a soldier displayed in times of war is not central to one’s being, therefore has no ontological connotations. This is why Tillich (2000:6) titled the lectures on which his book was based, *the courage to be (die moed om te wees)*, and not *the fortitude to be (die dapperheid om te wees)*. Courage as a human act is an ethical

concept. It is the ethical act of affirming one's own being (one's essential nature) in spite of elements in one's existence which go against that affirmation.

3.1 An ontology of anxiety

- **The meaning of nonbeing**

Courage is self-affirmation in spite of what wants to prevent it from affirming itself (Tillich 2000:32). Courage is usually seen as the power of the mind to overcome fear. Courage is not being afraid, but being afraid and doing it anyway. Anxiety is the existential awareness of nonbeing. It is not the knowledge that all beings must die, which causes anxiety in the individual. It is the awareness of one's own having to die. Anxiety is finitude experienced as one's own finitude.

- **Fear and anxiety**

A distinction was made in psychology and philosophy between fear and anxiety. Fear is being afraid of something specific which can be faced, analysed, attacked, endured. One can act upon it, participate in it, struggle with it. In this way one can take it into one's self-affirmation. Anxiety has no specific object. The source of the threat is nothingness – "to be or not to be ...". In religious terms this threat of nothingness is expressed as "eternal death". One can do nothing with anxiety and therefore feels helpless before it. It can be seen in a loss of direction, inadequate reactions, lack of intentionality (Tillich 2000:36-39).

Anxiety is the painful feeling of not being able to deal with the threat of a situation. It is the anxiety of not being able to preserve one's own being which is so frightening. It is beyond the reach of courage. The person then tries to establish object of fear. One could deal with those. Fear can be met by courage. It is impossible to stand naked anxiety for more than a short while.

3.2 Types of anxiety

The three types of anxiety are (Tillich 2000:40-54):

- Nonbeing threatens one's ontic (of *being*) self-affirmation: the relative threat of *fate*, the absolute threat of death.
- It threatens spiritual self-affirmation: the relative threat of *emptiness*, the absolute threat of meaninglessness.
- It threatens moral self-affirmation: the relative threat of *guilt*, the absolute threat of condemnation.

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Awareness of the threefold threat leads to the anxiety of fate and death, of emptiness and loss of meaning, as well as the anxiety of guilt and condemnation. This is not abnormal neurotic anxiety, but is part of the very fact of existence.

- **The anxiety of fate and death**

This anxiety is the response to the threat of nonbeing to one's ontic self-affirmation. *Ontic* from the Greek *ōn* (the participle of *eimi*) means "being". One's existence is threatened by fate – unpredictable events without meaning or purpose which can disrupt one's life. It has to do with the contingency of life: the contingency of our temporal being, that an individual exists in a specific period of time and no other; the contingency of one's spatial being, that a person exists in a specific place and no other; the contingent character of oneself and how one views the world; the contingent character of the world. In Pauline terminology this is the human *sarcikos* existence – being "flesh", transient and ephemeral. Contingently cause and effect (cf Wuthnow *et al* 1987) determine people's lives and throw them out of life when they die. Everything in life is contingent. Human lives have no ultimate necessity. That causes anxiety.

Human beings attempt to transform the anxiety into the fear of something specific, in order that those fears can be met with courage. The question is: is there a courage to be, with which to affirm one's being in spite of the threat against one's ontic self-affirmation?

- **The anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness**

Nonbeing is a threat not only to one's existence, but also to one's spiritual self-affirmation. Spiritual self-affirmation is to live creatively and to find meaning in life. It means living spontaneously, acting and reacting to culture and context. It is about meaningful participation in life. Participation changes that with which it interacts. In this way it is creative.

The spiritual life is a matter of ultimate concern. A spiritual life in which an ultimate reality is not experienced, is threatened by nonbeing in the forms of emptiness and meaninglessness. The anxiety of meaninglessness is anxiety about the loss of an ultimate concern – a meaning which gives meaning to all other meanings. This anxiety arises when one cannot find an answer to the question of the meaning of existence and when one loses one's spiritual centre. The anxiety of emptiness is brought on by the threat of nonbeing to the contents of spiritual life. External events or inner processes cause a belief to be broken down. The individual cannot participate creatively

in culture any more. He or she tries many things but nothing satisfies. This can happen when tradition loses its power to give meaning to everyday life.

The threats of emptiness and meaninglessness emphasize the finitude and estrangement of human beings. One problem is that of *personal doubt*. What used considered meaningful, is now doubted. Doubt is the result of being separated from the whole of reality, it is about isolation. If questioning and doubt bring become unbearable, one can “escape from one’s freedom” (Fromm, in Tillich 2000:49) by finding something to belong to and believe in. The self is suppressed in order to “fit in”. For instance, if the faith community does not provide a context in which believers can cope with their fate of being transient, they will seek spiritual self-affirmation in the secular world. Personal doubt is not always the reason for a feeling of emptiness when the system of values loses its values. It can be that these values no longer have the power of providing meaning to contemporary human existence. They could have lost their power because times had changed and they are no longer relevant. Yet, human beings tend to give meaning to their reality. Thereby they understand and shape their world and themselves. A threat to the spiritual being is a threat to the whole being. People often throw away their ontic existence rather than stand the despair of emptiness and meaninglessness. The threat to spiritual self-affirmation is experienced as greater than the threat to one’s existence.

- **The anxiety of guilt and condemnation**

Nonbeing can thirdly threaten one’s *moral* self-affirmation. This causes the anxiety of guilt in its milder form and of self-rejection and condemnation in its absolute form. A negative judgement of the self yields to sarcophobia. Human beings are “free” to the extent that they can make decisions, though they do not have total control of their lives. They are free within the contingencies of their finitude. Within these confines individuals should make of themselves what they are supposed to become, in other words “to fulfil their destiny”. This is what moral self-affirmation is all about: contributing to the fulfilment of one’s destiny, to actualise one’s potential.

However, individuals have the power to act against this, to contradict their essential being, to lose their destiny. Such a person becomes his or her own judge who makes a negative judgement of the self. This is experienced as guilt which can lead to complete self-rejection, a feeling of being condemned to a complete loss of one’s destiny.

In order to avoid this, the anxiety of guilt is transformed into moral action. One can defy the negative judgements of oneself and the demands on which they are based. Or one can opt for moral rigour (legalism) and the self-

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satisfaction derived from that. Behind both of these options lies moral despair – not finding oneself good enough. A better way to deal with this anxiety is obedience to the moral norm, that is being true to one's own essential being.

- **The meaning of despair**

The three types of anxiety (of death, meaninglessness and condemnation) are interwoven and all contribute to existential anxiety (Tillich 2000:54). Despair is the fulfilment of anxiety. Despair is an ultimate or "border-line" situation. One cannot go beyond it. Despair is to be without hope and without a future. If this is the case, then nonbeing has triumphed. But, there is a twist in the tale. Nonbeing is *felt* strongly in the emotion of despair. Strong feeling, however, means that there is life. The pain of despair means being *aware* of despair while simultaneously being unable to affirm one's being on account of the power of the nonbeing of despair. The person does not want this awareness. It is too painful. Getting rid of the awareness means getting rid of oneself. The courage demanded would be the courage *not to be*. This is ontic self-negation. Suicide can liberate an individual from the anxiety of fate and death, but not from guilt and condemnation. That cannot be escaped. Guilt and condemnation are of an infinite quality. This makes despair inescapable. Human life is a continuous attempt to avoid despair. It is mostly successful. The extremity of despair does not happen frequently. If, however, it is present in a life, it determines the person's whole outlook on life, their evaluation of their existence (Tillich 2000:54-57).

In every age one type of anxiety is predominant even though all three are always at work simultaneously (Tillich 2000:57-63). In the ancient period the *anxiety of fate and death* was predominant. It was the time of conflict and conquests, for example by Alexander the Great and imperial Rome. Things were well beyond the control of the individual. This produced anxiety and the quest for courage to meet the threat of fate and death. The anxiety which prevailed round about the end of the Middle Ages was *moral anxiety*. In pre-Reformation and Reformation times condemnation was symbolized as "the wrath of God". The unity of the Church disintegrated and individuals came into conflict with the church. The state (no longer the church) gained absolute power. God was seen as absolute and commanding. This produced the anxiety of guilt, of not being good enough for God. At the end of the modern period it is *spiritual anxiety* which dominates. This is the period of liberalism and democracy, technology and victory over enemies and over the disintegration of the previous era. In this period the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness prevails. People are threatened by nonbeing.

When structures of meaning are in place in society, individuals have a way of dealing with and overcoming their anxiety. They can participate in the institutions and ways of life. In periods of great change when the systems of meaning disintegrate, this method of assuaging anxiety is no longer adequate. The result is conflict between the old which wants to maintain itself and the new which renders the old powerless. This produces anxiety for all. One of the two sides of this anxiety is the anxiety of narrowness: unable to escape, being trapped. The other is the anxiety of openness: infinite space into which one falls and no space in which to be safe – the dark, unknown void. These are the two faces of the same anxiety which plagues humankind today.

3.3 Non-existential anxiety

Anxiety which is a given of human existence, or *existential anxiety*, has been discussed thus far. Non-existential anxiety, on the other hand, is the anxiety caused by specific events in human lives (Tillich 2000:64). An individual can deal with this anxiety either in ways which are conducive to the well-being of the person, or in harmful ways. Tillich (2000:64-85) refers to the latter in psychological terms such as “neurotic” or “pathological” anxiety. Psychological theories explain anxiety as the awareness of unsolved conflicts within the personality: between imaginary worlds and the experiences of the real world; between striving for greatness and perfection while experiencing one’s smallness and imperfection; between the desire to be accepted and the experience of rejection; between the will to be and the burden of being which evokes a hidden desire not to be there.

“Harmful anxiety” is existential anxiety under special conditions. These conditions have to do with the relation between anxiety and courage/self-affirmation. Anxiety tends to become fear in order to have an object with which to deal. If fear is dealt with courageously, it can be overcome. Courage does not eliminate anxiety because anxiety is existential (part of one’s existence). Courage takes the anxiety of nonbeing into itself, invites it in and makes peace with the reality of its existence. Courage is self-affirmation *in spite of* the threat of nonbeing (Tillich 2000:66). Anxiety can turn either way: to courage or to despair. Courage resists despair by taking anxiety into itself.

If one does not succeed in taking anxiety courageously into oneself, one can find a harmful way of avoiding despair, namely by escaping reality. People who choose this way still affirm themselves, and can do so strongly, but in a limited way. The self which is affirmed is a reduced one. “Harmful anxiety” is the way of avoiding nonbeing by avoiding being (Tillich 2000:66). Some or many of the potentialities of the self are not allowed into actualisation. The reason for this is that actualisation implies the acceptance

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of nonbeing and the anxiety that goes with it. People who are not able to affirm themselves strongly in spite of anxiety, can only affirm themselves in a weak, reduced way. They affirm something which is less than their essential or potential being. They surrender some of their potential in order to save the rest. This explains some of the ambiguities of this type of character. These people are extremely sensitive to the threat of nonbeing, therefore they are often rather creative. They have a greater intensity which is narrowed to a special point accompanied by a distorted relation to reality as a whole. Their resistance does have an instinctive wisdom. They are afraid that, if their unrealistic self-affirmation is broken down, there will be nothing to take its place. The threat is one of unlimited despair.

Tillich criticizes the medical approach of his day which claimed that all anxiety was pathology and should be treated and healed (Tillich 2000:70-78). The *courage to be* can indeed be attained with medical help, but this approach does not accept the possibility of existential anxiety. It does not account for the awareness of finitude, doubt and guilt in every human being. Anxiety is universally part of human nature.

The anxiety of fate and death results in human beings striving for safety (Tillich 2000:74-75). This in itself is not pathological. Much of culture is designed to provide safety. No absolute security is possible, however. One needs the courage to surrender some or all of this security for the sake of self-affirmation. Nevertheless human beings attempt to reduce the power of fate as much as possible. The security created by harmful anxiety is like a prison. In order to feel safe, individuals create severe limitations for themselves. These limitations are not based on a full awareness of reality. Misplaced fear is a result of a harmful anxiety of fate and death.

The same goes for the harmful forms of the anxiety of guilt and condemnation (Tillich 2000:75). People try to avoid guilt by developing self-discipline and good habits. This makes them feel fairly satisfied with themselves though they realise that they cannot be perfect. Harmful anxiety does the same in a limited, fixed way. In self-defence the person sees guilt where there is no or indirect guilt. The same is the case with the harmful forms of the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness (Tillich 2000:76). The anxiety of doubt (part of finite human spirituality) drives individuals to seek security in systems of meaning which are supported by tradition and authority. Harmful anxiety creates a narrow certitude which is not based on reality.

Homophobia is an example of harmful anxiety. It is the irrational fear of people who are “different” and with whom one is not in existential interaction. Homophobia leads to sarcophobia, which is the objectified fear of one’s own or another person’s being.

3.4 Individualization and participation

According to Tillich (2000:86) there are two sides to self-affirmation: the courage to be as an individual and the courage to be as a part. The first is the affirmation of the self as a self, that is a separated, individualized unique, free, self-determining self. The threat of loss of the self leads to anxiety and the awareness of concrete threats to the essence of the self is experienced as fear. The centred self cannot be destroyed but it can be divided or exchanged. Theologically speaking each human being is unique and has an infinite value. This concerns “the courage to be as oneself” (Tillich 2000:87)

The self exists in a structured world to which it belongs. It is not only about individualization, but also about participation: being part of something from which one is separated. This concerns “the courage to be as a part” (Tillich 2000:88). Participation means “taking part”. It can happen in one of three ways: “sharing”, “having in common with” or “being a part of”. Self-affirmation of the self as an individual always includes the power of being in which the self participates. The self affirms itself as participant in the power of a group, a movement, of essences, of the power of being as such. This is about “the courage to be as a part”. This side of self-affirmation is also threatened by nonbeing. Individuals are threatened with losing their participation in the world. The human condition of finitude and estrangement often causes that which is essential to become split. Then anxiety becomes harmful.

3.6 Courage and individualization

In the 20th century people in the Western world have experienced a universal breakdown of meaning. They have lost a meaningful world and a self which lives in meanings out of a spiritual centre. They have sacrificed themselves to their own productions. This dehumanisation is experienced as despair. Those who hold on to their courage to be as a part, are disturbed by the expressions of the courage of despair. The collectivist manifestation of the courage to be as part is built on the idea that only in the continuous encounter with other persons does the person become and remain a person. This encounter takes place in community. Collectivist movements in modern history include fascism, nazism and communism (Tillich 2000:96). The conformist manifestation of the courage to be as part can be seen in present-day ideologies such as ethics of growth, progressive education, and crusading democracy. Participation in these processes demands conformity and adjustment to the realities of the secular world (Tillich 2000:115). The safety gained in this way is criticized as self-limiting. It limits the individual’s ability to

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be as a part and is not regarded as true safety by those who opt for the courage of despair.

According to Tillich (2000:141), Christian theology should decide *for* truth *against* safety, even if safety is often supported by the churches. He concedes that there is such a thing as Christian conformism and Christian collectivism. However, Christian courage should be identified with the courage to be as a part. The courage to be as oneself is, according to him, the necessary corrective to the courage to be as a part. Courage is self-affirmation “in spite of”. The courage to be as oneself is self-affirmation of the self as itself. The question is: what is this self that affirms itself? One answer is: what it makes of itself. The self cannot be cut off from participation in the world, otherwise it is an empty shell. But, because of participation in the world, the self cannot be totally free to make of itself what it wants. In theology absolute freedom belongs only to God. Human beings have but finite freedom.

4. REALITY AND FAITH – TILlich AND NIEBUHR

4.1 Tillich’s ontology of anxiety

Courage needs the power of being: a power which transcends the nonbeing experienced in the anxiety of fate and death, which is present in the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness, which is effective in the anxiety of guilt and condemnation. The courage which takes this threefold anxiety into itself must be rooted in a power of being that is greater than the power of oneself and the power of one’s world. Neither self-affirmation as a part or self-affirmation as oneself, can hold this anxiety at bay. According to Tillich (2001:156) courage has an open or hidden religious root. Religion is the state of being grasped by the power of being-itself. This takes the form of self-surrender. Losing oneself, which might seem to be the negation of the self, is actually the ultimate self-affirmation and the most radical form of courage. Nonbeing is no longer a threat. The self is given voluntarily and becomes part of the ultimate reality. Faith unites the courage to be as oneself and the courage to be as a part, and transcends them both. That kind of courage is based on God and is therefore not threatened by the loss of oneself nor by the loss of one’s world.

The courage of confidence derived from a personal encounter with God, is the courage to accept acceptance in spite of the consciousness of guilt. It is rooted in the certainty of divine forgiveness (Tillich 2000:164-167). The courage to be is the courage to be accepted in spite of being unacceptable (“justification by faith”). There are no conditions for acceptance. Rather, those who lack special qualities are freely accepted into the transforming communion with God. Self-affirmation in spite of the anxiety of

guilt and condemnation, presupposes participation in something which transcends oneself. A self-transcending courage is needed in order to accept this acceptance. One needs the courage of confidence (Tillich 2000:168). The ultimate source of the power which heals, is God who accepts the unacceptable. One's own or somebody else's finite power of being cannot overcome the threat of nonbeing experienced in the despair of self-condemnation. God is the foundation of the courage to be (Tillich 2000:186).

Faith is the state of being grasped by the power of being-itself (Tillich 2000:173). Faith is the experience of the power of being which manifests in every act of courage. Faith bridges the gap between finite human beings and God, the infinite being-itself. Faith is the existential acceptance of something transcending ordinary experience. People who have been grasped by the power of being-itself are able to affirm themselves because they know that they are affirmed by this power.

In the present period the anxiety of doubt and meaninglessness is prevalent. This anxiety undermines everything. Doubt and meaninglessness cause the experience of an abyss into which the meaning of life and the truth of responsibility disappear. Can faith resist anxiety in this most radical form? Can faith resist meaninglessness? The state of meaninglessness should first be accepted (Tillich 2000:174-175). The act of accepting meaninglessness is itself a meaningful act. It is an act of faith. The power of being-itself in which the believer participates gives him or her the courage to take the anxiety of meaninglessness into itself.

The courage to be which is rooted in the experience of God, unites and transcends the courage to be as a part and the courage to be as oneself. It avoids the loss of oneself by participation and the loss of one's world by individualization. The courage mediated by the church can only be rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ (cf Tillich 2000:188). The existential meaning of the cross and resurrection forms the heart of the church's proclamation of the gospel. To be as a part in such a church is to receive a courage to be which is rooted in the God who appears ("resurrection") when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt ("cross") (Tillich 2000:190).

4.2 Niebuhr's "Christian realism"

Tillich emphasised the courage to participate in the "real" secular world. Realism, according to Niebuhr, is about identifying and exposing those certitudes provided by conventional norms which conceal self-interest and power. Christian realism is an existence which takes the tension between realism and idealism into oneself. Idealism is the disposition of being loyal to norms and ideals rather than focussing on one's own interests (Niebuhr

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1953:119-120). Evil is self-interest without regard for the whole, whereas good is being in harmony with the whole. However, if the focus is on what Niebuhr (1944:9-10) calls “a subordinate and premature ‘whole’ such as the nation” (or the traditional family, or any such social institutions) – the result can also be evil because the greater whole had not been taken into account. An idealist strives to “bring self-interest under the discipline of a more universal law and in harmony with a more universal good” (Niebuhr 1944:9-10). The realist makes plans from a starting point of historical realities, whereas idealists focus on new possibilities and plan towards a goal. Realistically, a balance of power has to be found in order to achieve peace and equilibrium. For the idealist the emphasis is rather on “what should be” – in Heidegger’s terms *Dasein* (Heidegger 1962:42, 44; cf Inwood 2000:20-30) – and therefore “what should be done”.

Human beings are inclined to be self-centred and promote their own interests. In this sense egotism is “natural” and universal. What is universal, is not necessarily normative. For instance, it is not “natural” for human beings to transcend themselves and find their purpose in God rather than in themselves (Niebuhr 1953:129-130; cf Augustine, *Dei Civitate Dei* 22; see Dyson 1998; cf Brown 1967:299-312; Wright 1999:15). Human beings have the freedom to make themselves the centre of existence which in the end is self-defeating. A better alternative is to find the centre of their lives in God’s love which compels them to channel this love to the world. Only in this way can human beings and the world be at peace and establish justice. “The corruption of human freedom could not destroy the original dignity of man” (Niebuhr, in Rasmussen 1989:126). Niebuhr (in Davis & Good 1960:64ff; 1953:145-146) demarcates his notion of Christian realism by pointing out the shortcomings of both the systems of realism and Christianity:

Modern realists know the power of collective self-interest as Augustine did; but they do not understand its blindness. Modern pragmatists understand the irrelevance of fixed and detailed norms; but they do not understand that love as the final norm must take the place of these inadequate norms. Modern liberal Christians know that love is the final norm for man; but they fall into sentimentality because they fail to measure the power and persistence of self-love.

Christian realism pertains to a relationship of dialectic tension between idealism and realism. It does not concede that self-interest is normative just because it is so pervasive, but also understands that, because of this human tendency, there is no easy way to a utopian world of pure love and

disinterestedness (Niebuhr, in Rasmussen 1989:130; cf Niebuhr 1940:61-62). Christian realism frees people from a “necessity of having illusions about human nature in order to avert despair and preserve their faith in the meaning of life” (Niebuhr, in Rasmussen 1989:130). Christian realism retains the tension of seeing human beings as they are while also believing in love as the law of life. Christians can then take up responsibility for fighting for justice in the world without claiming to “know the whole truth” or losing their humility in the face of the complexities of the world.

Life is and will always be fragmentary and incomplete. Human beings will always know frustration with the incongruities of life which cannot be brought under human control. “The final wisdom of life requires not the annulment of incongruity, but the achievement of serenity within and above it” (Niebuhr 1952:62-63). What brings human beings together is their common need rather than their common achievement (Niebuhr, in Rasmussen 1989:132). True peace is not procured by attempting to be in harmony with life. It can only be found *beyond* the troubles and disappointments which are part of life (Niebuhr 1946: 187). Christian “otherworldliness” is not an escape from the real world. According to Niebuhr (in Davis & Good 1960:206-209), “it gives us the faith by which we can seek to fulfil our historic tasks without illusions and without despair Only a combination of repose and anxiety, of serenity and preparedness can do justice to the whole of our life and the whole of our world.”

4. A CHRISTIAN REALISTIC PERSPECTIVE ON HOMOPHOBIA AND HOMOSEXUALITY

Human behaviour is about relationships and interaction. According to Niebuhr’s perspective on Christian realism believers exist by taking the tension between realism (the secular world’s everydayness) and idealism (God’s otherworldliness) into themselves. This goes for homosexual believers and heterosexuals. The problem surrounding homosexuality is that some people are homophobic. Homophobia is an irrational fear of and disgust for persons such as gays. Homophobia leads to sarcophobia, an irrational fear and hatred of one’s own or other people’s being and body. These phenomena are related to what Tillich (2000:32-39) referred to as the “ontology of anxiety”.

When homosexuals experience the homophobia of members of the faith community, they are torn by conflict between the self and the norms (biblical) of the institutional church. For example, *The Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* (Johansson 1990:648-649; cf Ellison 1993:149) states the following: “For homosexuals the Judeo-Christian tradition has meant nothing but ostracism and punishment, exile and death ...” For gays the courage to be

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as a part is to take the tension between the *realism* of homophobia/sarcophobia and the *idealism* of faith in God “who appears when God has disappeared” in the anxiety of doubt, into themselves. Heterosexuals are challenged to courageously overcome their fear and disgust of gays.

In the institutional church where homophobia prevails, it is not the paradoxical tension between realism and idealism which manifests, but an rather an anomaly. Homosexuality is judged to be sinful while at the same time there is a plea for the pastoral care of homosexual persons. In an unsatisfactory attempt to overcome this anomaly, some churches distinguish between the sinner (person) and sinful deeds in such a way as to separate persons from their deeds. Such an approach can contribute to the self-hatred of homosexual persons. This context is not conducive to gays courageously participating in the faith community. Many of them rather choose to be alienated from the church and disappear in the secular world. Others leave the church to form their own faith communities. This compromises the unity of the church. It therefore becomes an ethical problem when the church, coming from this untenable point of departure, tries to respond in a pastoral way to homosexual people in order to contribute to their healing and wholeness.

Legal systems in democratic countries find homophobia to be unacceptable and homophobic behaviour to be a violation of the human rights of homosexual persons. The church, however, often contributes to homophobia. There is a lack of Christian love and tolerance toward homosexual people. The challenge to the church is to do no more harm and to help homosexual people to overcome sarcophobia.

The homophobic response of society to the phenomenon of homosexuality has had two grave consequences. Society communicates aversion and even hatred to homosexual persons (cf De Gruchy 1997:241-242). On the part of homosexual people it leads to suppression of the self, neuroses and a confused identity (see Dollimore 1991:245). The destabilising consequences of homophobia in the lives of homosexual persons has resulted in a changed attitude in medical and psychiatric circles (cf Kritzinger 1996:107). The American Psychiatric Association (APA) decided to remove homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (Cameron-Ellis 1999:14). This had an effect on what was considered to be “abnormal”. Homosexuality is now seen as an aspect of socialisation experiences and no longer as a “problem”. This led to a greater awareness in society of the negative impact stereotyping has on homosexual persons (Cameron-Ellis 1991:16).

Stereotyping contributes to the negative perceptions of and attitudes which leave homosexual persons with the experience of being rejected by

groups such as the church. Stigmatising and marginalizing of homosexual persons represent some of the most crucial life issues for gays. The APA has found that homosexuality as such cannot be linked with matters such as instability, faulty judgement, unreliability or general social or vocational inability (see Cameron-Ellis 1999:16). Interaction with homosexual people, getting to know them first-hand as perfectly “normal” and likeable people, can break down such stereotypes (see Balch 2000:301).

The following socio-psychological findings (see Cameron-Ellis 1999:73) are notable: the theological convictions of heterosexual persons change after having had closer contact with homosexual persons; the church is influenced by society; homosexual persons experience inner conflict because they are accused by the church of disobeying God’s will and destroying traditional family values (Cameron-Ellis 1999:62). This is an indication of homophobia and sarcophobia which are reinforced by the church. It contributes to homosexual people not experiencing the church as their spiritual home.

Pain and despair underlie the exodus of homosexual people from Christian churches. The loss of their religious tradition and the loss of an experience of the love of God and the faith community impoverish their lives. They are faced with the dilemma: to believe in God means to hate their own homosexuality and to accept their homosexuality means to be compelled to reject their faith in God. However, to be disappointed in the fallible human church does not necessarily have to lead to a loss of faith in God (cf McNeill 1988:13). However, if people lose their faith on account of the convictions and actions of the church, the church has to be held accountable. The French philosopher Gabriel Marcel (in McNeill 1988:13) puts it as follows: “The believer must see him- or herself as someone responsible in a certain measure for the unbelief of the other ...” In order to honestly be themselves, homosexual people need a loving community within which to heal, to learn to accept themselves, to integrate their spiritual and sexual realities and to grow spiritually. They, too, should be able to celebrate their sexuality and find joy in their relationships in the presence of God. They also need the support of a community in their struggle against injustice (Mc Neill 1988:193).

According to the Church of England’s Lambeth Conference 1998 (see Doe 2000:Appendix 2), the church cannot but declare that homosexual practice is contrary to Scripture. The church does, however, call upon members to care for all people, irrespective of their sexual orientation. The church condemns homophobia as an irrational fear of homosexual persons. Though culturally-determined statements on “homosexual” behaviour in the Bible are negative, the church acknowledges that today there are people who experience themselves as having a homosexual orientation. Many of these

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are members of the church. As such they require pastoral care and moral guidance from the church. They, too, long for the life-giving power of God's Spirit. They too want to live according to God's will. This includes their relationships. The church undertakes to listen to the stories of homosexual persons and to assure them of God's love.

This position of the Church of England is another example of escaping "Christian realism". It rather enhances secularism. It does not present dialectical theological insights, but Platonic dualism. Homophobia and sarcophobia clearly cannot be justified on the basis of the gospel. My contention is also that homosexuality as such is not necessarily condemned by the gospel (see Dreyer 2004). This I conclude on the grounds of the dialectic tension in Pauline theology, substantiated by Paul Tillich's (2000:32-39) ontology of anxiety and Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realism (Niebuhr, in Rasmussen 1989:126-135).

According to Tillich's categories sarcophobia would be included in "existential anxiety", exacerbated by homophobia as "ontological anxiety". A "Christian realist" can, however, have an existential understanding of the Pauline tension between "reality" (*sarx*) and "ideal" (*pneuma*). Paul's distinction between *pneuma* (the Spirit of God) and *sarx* (temporal/fallible humanity) implies that authentic life can only be grounded in a pneumatic existence and not in a *sarcikos* existence. A *sarcikos* existence is one which seeks its power in fallible humanness. That is futile. The "truth of the gospel" yields to the message that our *sarcikos* existence does not constitute ultimate authenticity, but that human beings as *sarx* are directed by God's *pneuma*. According to Paul, obedience to the "gospel of truth" (Gl 2:5; cf Gl 2:14; 5:7) pertains to a life which is dead to *sarx* but alive for God (see Van Aarde 2002:516). Authentic existence is only possible by means of God's grace and the gifts of God's Spirit (*charismata*). This does not mean, however, that the person who lives in the spirit has ceased to be a temporal (*sarx*) being. A *sarcikos* existence furthermore has value for the everyday life of a person who has a meaningful relationship with God. The question is whether homosexuality is such a valuable aspect of the *sarcikos* existence, or whether it is incompatible with an authentic existence before God. If it cannot be deemed compatible with a pneumatic existence, a homosexual person, as a consequence, cannot be regarded as a believer. Sarcophobia will be the result. Research has indicated that homosexuality as such is not harmful, but homophobia and sarcophobia are. A theology which takes the dialectic between a (theological) symbolic world and a social world (see Berger 1969, 1973, 1992) seriously, cannot ignore the results of socio-psychological

research, especially not if it indicates that the authentic spirituality of some Christians is at risk.

It is often presupposed that Paul sees *sarx* in a negative light. This is especially the case if *sarx* is connected with sexuality, since the New Testament as a whole is often seen to be negative towards sexuality. Others, however, do not regard Paul as at all negative in his view on *sarx*. Elizabeth Edwards (1996:70-71) argues that Paul is negative about *sarx* only when he sees it as the cause of people sinning out of weakness. In other instances his use of the term is neutral, such as when it denotes what is natural and belongs to temporal humanity. He also uses *sarx* neutrally in the sense of an era. According to Edwards (1996:70-71) Paul uses *sarx* to indicate: everything referring to humanity; physical relationships; what is symbolic of everything which opposes God; what is symbolic for being controlled by *sarx*. It is about everything concerning humanity and the world, everything which can draw human beings away from God or bring them into opposition with God.

Paul is more positive about *soma* (body) than about *sarx*. A pneumatic life transcends the *sarcikos* existence without ceasing to be *sarx*. For this kind of existence Paul uses the term *soma*. He calls the church the *soma* of Christ, indicating the sphere in which pneumatic persons live, that is in God's presence in the midst of and in spite of their *sarcikos* existence. In Niebuhr's language this yields to "Christian realism". According to 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 the church exists as a spiritual body. This "body" consists of many members, each of which has an own *sarcikos* existence. The "many" members are unified in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Together they make up the one body of Christ. In the church the *sarx* does not cease to exist. Rather it serves God. Herman Waetjen (1996:113) puts it as follows: "Given the realities of sexuality as conceptualised, experienced, and institutionalised human nature, both homosexuality and heterosexuality may be represented in the body of Christ, the new creation of the One and the Many. This implies, of course, that both are subject to the ethical norms of God's rule and therefore are expected to give embodiment to the new humanization that makes it possible." It is not one's humanity (*sarcikos* existence, e.g. the reality of homosexuality), which causes one to find oneself outside of God's kingdom. The cause is rather a life not guided by God's Spirit (cf Waetjen 1996:110).

Seitz (2000:181) comments on an appropriate point of departure for pastoral care with gay persons: "One gets a sense that the proper pastoral stance is now one of lifting sexual taboos, raising cultural consciousness, encouraging 'outed' lifestyles ..." Pastoral work has the aim that all human beings should be able to live free and whole lives in Christ (Coleman

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1980:282). According to the gospel humanity as such (*sarcikos* existence) is not sin. Sin is seeking ultimate meaning in humanity rather than in God. In Niebuhr's terms it is to be "self-directed" without transcending this towards other-directedness. Humanity which is aware of otherworldliness and transcendence in everydayness, offers gays the possibility to be devout followers of Christ in spite of their being marginalized in church and society. The New Testament scholar, Helmut Koester (in Hazel 2000:16), comments as follows on why people wanted to join the Christian community: "Certain parts of the early Christian mission were intent in creating a new community. Only for that reason was this movement successful ... There is a future for the individual." Marginalized people were welcome in the early Christian community. There everyone was equal, love was the norm and care for one another was imperative. "People are taken out of an isolation ... Christianity really established a realm of mutual social support for the members who joined the church. So, Christianity could adjust to different types of people" (Koester, in Hazel 2000:16).

According to the sociologist of religion, Rodney Stark (in Hazel 2000:16), an objective of the Christian faith was to create a moral climate within the culture. A novel idea in the New Testament was that it was of no use trying to serve God if one did not love others. Even more revolutionary was the notion that even outsiders should be treated with Christian love and charity. On this basis homosexual persons seek acceptance in Christian communities. Jesus brought hope for all by showing the way to God's unconditional love and a life in God's presence. The marginalized are not, however, included in God's kingdom *because they are marginalized*. It is not an inclusion on account of humanitarian reasons. Rather, the inclusion of the marginalized shows that God's love is different to that of human beings who can only love conditionally and tend to exclude those regarded as unacceptable by conventional culture. The gospel message of inclusivity emphasises the grace of God. Faith is not an impossible set of churchly pronouncements, but the courage to accept the acceptance of the unacceptable, namely oneself – the courage to overcome anxiety and hold on to idealism while being realistic.

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