Merging Two Masters: Tillich's Culminating Years at Union

by

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Tickled pink by the invite, I worried about those who heard me at The Big Easy (as New Orleans then was) in 1995. Could I dredge up anything new? No problem it turned out—our mentor grows ever more appreciable. Since the previous panegyric I imbibed more Tillich than realized, while his image complexified in the brine of post-modernity and bilge of my subconscious. Doubtless for you too the Paulus of history has enlarged, as well as the Tillich of faith. Fact and interpretation can't be split, as Kaehler¹ said—though to work at the facts hones comprehension. In my view, comprehending our guru has light years to go. Shaken by rereading him, Hannah² and others, I've come to think mapping his mentality could take from now on. That's reason, though, to be glad for our Society, with the fun together, and it's nice to be with you this one more time.

I'm asked to recall the Paulus of history in his last stretch at Union, when I was there—1946 to 1953. He said those were some of his best years. They were of mine, when theology went to the moon. The giants were having their era. From lower land we see their tallness, and our hero's flag flies high. Trying to sketch him tonight can allow but stabs: one entree, really, with some salad. And, yes, my sightings were through one lens of hundreds angled at "Mr. Theology"—as he began widely to be known. Also, grinding my lens had just begun. Nor had I come to The Big Apple to study Tillich. No one had. Niebuhr³ was prima, till his stroke in 1951, among several aces on that team. But for none was there a personality cult. A Tillich Society was unimaginable. We were pursuing issues, preparing for ministry, prompted by General MacArthur's dictum that after the Bomb human solutions must be theological.

With other schools pulling too, I had opted to study with Tillich and Niebuhr for their cutting edge. Both Niebuhr brothers had pointed me to Paulus on the scandal of particularity: I was baffled how the Absolute was revealed in the historical Jesus. In my head and heart evangelical Methodism sparred with biblicism, and Emory's Leroy Loemker had enamored me of philosophy. At Union's orientation, Ivy League classmates cowed us novices by quoting Eliot and Rilke. But I was more intimidated by having to get Tillich to okay an advanced course. Sure my gall would be shamed, at his door I tapped faintly, and eager to retreat, heard "Ja, komm." A German friend was due from downtown. Of course I wouldn't bother him. No, he drew me in, cleared books from a chair. He noticed my face, he said, among new students when the faculty was introduced. Wanted to meet me! What? Our eyes had locked a time or two. Later I learned how he surveyed audiences, beguiled by angst or bumptiousness. Where was I from? He liked the South, hoped to know it better. No problem about the course. Desire was the thing. On the desk lay a volume by Whitehead,⁴ on whom I mentioned I did a paper. "You have to tell me then," he replied, "what he really is saying." My mind went blank, but the friend came. I bowed out perspiring, somehow never since dreading to be with Paulus.

My naïveté lessened through windfalls like the East Hampton summer with the Tillichs and Roberts. Starting thesis work under Paulus, an instructorship let me sit with the faculty and savor their banter with him. About the labor pains of the system, assumed intact already in his head; the wrangle over expelling gays, which Paulus opposed almost alone; or why he thought Regin Prenter⁵ too traditional to succeed him, and wondered obversely about Macquarrie⁶. What I wouldn't take gold for was the privatissimum Paulus convened to unpack sticky issues, loosened by Mosel in his living room. John Smith sparkled in those sessions, with characters like Sam Laeuchli from Basel, who memorized the Church Dogmatics⁷, or Heywood Thomas from Oxford, catching us in category mistakes. Visiting from Cambridge, C. H. Dodd contended with Paulus, vainly, that Jesus posed an historical risk as well as one of faith.

Thinkers often aren't lecturers. Tillich was both, but his most enjoyed gift may have been dialogic pedagogy. Just ordained, he and Dox⁸ Wegener launched their "culture evenings" for small groups in Berlin. Paulus wrote in the leader's guide: "Possessing truth only in a relative way, [the leader] enters discussion as a partner, as a fellow seeker after truth. With truth alone the object of the dialogue, he stands ready to rethink and modify his own position, as well as critically test the position of the discussion partner. He is able to enter the conversation as a partner, rather than as a teacher, because of his realization that truth is not his private possession and because of his conviction that no truth is ultimately incompatible with Christianity."⁹ It's uncanny how that description predicts the privatissimum four decades later. A visceral need for Paulus, for me it was interacting with Plato in the mode of Socrates.

Since those semesters when I saw the loaded, intent, beset, benign, serious, humorous, lightly graying, just my height, very slightly starting to bulge 60 till 67 year old—in chapel, class, some forum almost daily—a lot about Paulus has etched more fully out, like photos in developing fluid. Feelings ripened like wine, and intuitions were marinated by conversational basting. My eyes saw, but I knew others who knew Paulus better. Most of these catalysts now rest in the transcendent union of unambiguous life (Tillichian for "church triumphant"). Dave Roberts, Richard Kroner, Renate Albrecht, Langdon Gilkey, Jerry Brauer, and John Dillenberger were among unique witnesses I was close to. Tillich's prodigious capacity for relationships was diversified, wholistic, forgiving. He could be haplessly funny with alpha types—as in the Gilkey anecdotes—or suavely directive with the bumbling. One I never heard cited was Georgia Harkness 10 . A story went around Union that Paulus was explaining to a theological society his view that God doesn't exist, when Georgia asked "Well, Dr. Tillich, doesn't that make you an atheist?" to which the riposte was "Yes, I am an atheist." We heard this as connoting hostility, Georgia being a protégée of Edgar Brightman, the personalist champion who never made peace with Niebuhr or Tillich. A decade later Paulus was in Berkeley to lecture and accepted my offer for sightseeing. But he came an hour early to find Georgia, then my colleague at PSR, her office next door. I was startled to perceive his voice and their camaraderie through the thin wall, and we wound up driving around the Bay together as they warmly reminisced. Georgia was an alpha type and redoubtable theologian who bore lifelong physical pain with a wry smile. In ten collegial years I never saw her so emotive as with Paulus.

Sadly such a world of witness to Tillich is now beyond access. On the other hand, for me, published sources have freshly opened. In that vein, as a primer for the stint at Union, let me stress "On the Idea of a Theology of Culture," spoken to Berlin's Kant Society 14 years before the Tillichs debarked in New York. Go back again to that bold

lecture and wrestle with why Vic Nuovo¹¹ regarded it as Tillich's epochal breakthrough. It bears on tonight because it placards graphically the kind of theologian the blossoming Paulus had opted to be—and got well started being at Dresden and Frankfurt—but never could freely be at Union, except off at Yale with the Terry Lectures and then in last hurrahs at Harvard and Chicago.

Hermeneutically, to construe the Tillich I've come to realize I knew at Union, picture two theologians indwelling one cerebrum—two keenly intent theologic mindsets, both hugely erudite, both potently creative, sharing, though never evenly and sometimes contentiously, a single frenetic career nearing high tide. There was indelibly in Paulus what the 1919 lecture dubbed the "theologian of culture," his calling from deep down, and—though repudiated as his path in 1919—there was also—with unsparing resolve and contextual necessity once at Union—the "theologian of the church" whom the seminary hired. The first Tillich I read was The Religious Situation, the masterful cultural commentary of 1926 which seemed to collude supportively with at least neo-orthodox church theology. I took for granted the Christian analyst of culture could be, and was needed as, a co-functionary of the churchly teacher of doctrine—as with Christopher Dawson¹² or Reinhold Niebuhr. But theology of culture in that sense is not the agenda of Tillich's 1919 breakthrough. Nuovo saw this sharply, as few others have, not even that most erudite of Tillich scholars, John Clayton.

The theology of the church, Tillich reminded the Kant Society, is governed by the norm of its tradition. But the theologian of culture, he fervently averred, "is not bound by any such consideration." Emancipated from all traditional norms, this theologian "is a free agent in living culture open to accept not only any other form but also any other spirit."¹³ For this species of theologian, which 33 year old Paulus says is his vocation, theology is not about "God as a special object" but about religion everywhere as "directedness toward the Unconditional," or in the phrase later settled upon "was uns unbedingt angeht." Such "unconditional concern" is the core of every culture, the culture being its varied forms. Unnamed, what Theologie der Kultur is can be seen in Hegel and Nietzsche—or all the great philosophers. It is the only theology that is really wissenschaftlich, meriting university status-as Tillich's 1923 System der Wissenschaften¹⁴ further expounds. This theology (resembling our American "religious studies") is not "the presentation of a special...revelation" like the Christian¹⁵. To think it could be buys into the discredited notion of a supernatural revelation. Theology of culture and church theology (the usual dogmatics or systematics) not only differ. In 1919, for Paulus, they exclude each other.

No wonder Union, getting wind of this Tillich, dragged feet on tenure. Dr. Coffin was brought around, not by Reinie and students (though they helped), so much as his own reading of Tillich. For notwithstanding the 1919 pledge to the culture kind only, by the mid-twenties the church kind of theology had reinvaded Tillich. Grounded staunchly in the paradox of God in Christ, it had reestablished itself in Paulus's vocational identity alongside the total openness of culture theology. Two theologies would henceforth be using the same nominal brain, one nearer Barth, the other Emanuel Hirsch. Paulus's examiners for the licentiate had said he was "grillhaft"—given to cricket-like jumps. In the climactic phase of his career, just after leaving Union, he himself soberly assured Grace Cali he was "schizophrenic"¹⁶ his word, not mine. More existential than Nicholas's¹⁷ coincidence of opposites, or paradox in Luther and Kierkegaard, it conjures

up the (obscure) wartime "nervous breakdown" and the analysis Paulus later underwent, not to speak of Hannah's lurid laments which we must studiously avoid tonight.

In any case, a bipolar syndrome went on being stressfully manifest in Paulus's theologizing. The two kinds of theologian, divorced in 1919 for incompatibility, moved back under one roof, or one pate. Not even Clayton can decide just when. Certainly by 1924, Paulus embraced the Christ norm as co-absolute with ultimate concern. The 1919 lecture had accorded Kirchentheologie a lower place, outside the university. Apart from the ensuing maelstrom of conceptual debate, this created a practical bind. If the two theologians were irreconcilable, how would they jointly earn a living? There were no chairs of "Theology of Culture" as projected in the lecture. If its pure form contradicted church theology, which did offer jobs, it would have to stay mostly out of the workplace or conflate with the faith of the church. For our evolving mentor it did both. Union Seminary, while I was there, was ever and again shocked by theology of culture suddenly showing up naked, while many were also spellbound to descry a majestic new theological synthesis being chiseled and sanded into shape.

Tillich's turbulent life amid the Weimar upheavals landed him at Marburg—to teach church theology. He was more than adequately equipped for this from youth up. Authoritative "Little Father," conservative Lutheran cleric with philosophic flair, held his son accountable. Never outright rebelling against Vaterchen, despite mystic sensibility and autonomous intellect, Paulus took holy orders, did ministry, then battlefront chaplaincy with preaching and pastoral talent. Already in 1912 he outlined a systematics with Wegener, later a church apologetics. Now in 1925 was delivered in a classroom near Heidegger's the Marburg Dogmatik¹⁸, filled with churchly and cultural insights we still are measuring. Long unpublished, the lectures were regrettably unavailable to Clayton as he traced the would-be correlation of our two masters. Categorical in the Dogmatik is allegiance to Christ as final revelation. As in the grand opus to come, and as was loud and clear at Union, Paulus by the mid '20s propounded as universal the concrete norm of Christianity. This sold Henry Coffin, without a word of the 1919 mandate being recanted. That mandate burst out sporadically at Union, even while creatively mutating, igniting furious argument in dining hall and dorm.

Compelling in chapel, Paulus preached on Galatians 6:15: "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision, but a new creation." Circumcision, it was jolting to hear, meant religion—not only Judaism but the 'churchianity' we were to be ordained in. Nothing of that mattered, any more than irreligion. Some mavericks cheered, but more students insisted Tillich couldn't be Christian. Some faculty obviously agreed—though politeness ruled. Most of his colleagues said they couldn't decipher Tillich, though they liked him and were proud Union had two world class theologians. I did not then know how ignorant seminary faculties are of each other's theology, but this was especially true in regard to Tillich.

At a forum Paulus clarified that Christ, not the church, is our axial loyalty, while the form confessing Christ is unavoidably idolatrous. Discussion fulminated, involving manifold other issues as well. Did Tillich pray? Did he believe in the Resurrection? Memorable was Ed Cherbonnier¹⁹ lambasting the impersonal Ground of Being. Paulus defended atheists as attacking idols and held pantheism was caricatured; its true sense was Spinoza's natura naturans, which as infinitely holy was his own God. Sometimes exasperated by rejection, as when the faculty discussed Systematic Theology, Vol. 1²⁰, he endured as wholesome anything that fueled serious questioning.

The biggest challenge for the Christian identity of Tillich came from "God beyond God" in 1952. Could Courage To Be's²¹ author really place his own ultimate trust in the biblical personal God who "disappears in the flames of doubt." We asked Paulus about this, and he explained the Terry Lectures were addressed to unfaith, outside the theological circle. We chuckled at Yale's philosophy department, where John Smith²² went, being equated with unfaith. But hermeneutical issues were surfacing which could be disputed till the cows came home. Could faith address unfaith unfaithfully while genuinely being faith? We didn't really know how to ask that question at Union, if we do today.

Paulus, even while his job was seminary theology, always had fans for his theology of culture, whether in the stark form of 1919, or beginning to comport with the Christian foundation. Rollo May²³ was a Unionite who found in Courage To Be Paulus par excellence. Ruth Nanda Anshen²⁴, with her avant garde salon, was a notable outside booster of our theologian of culture, along with stars of the Frankfurt School like Adorno and Horkheimer. Jonathan Z. Smith, in his AAR presidential address to it some years ago, even credited Paulus (meaning of course the culture lobe of the dual cortex) with inciting the AAR. Nor can we be unaware that 45 years after Tillich's death, there is today upsurging endorsement for just his theology of culture. Last year at Toronto, Glenn Whitehouse wanted to parry the likes of Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris with the kind of theology prescribed in System der Wissenschaften, and in the summer Tillich Bulletin—wow!—from Marc Boss on Fichte to Richard Grigg on scientific atheism, the ball is being run with as hardly ever. Fichte is a superb example of Paulus's 1919 "culture theologian." And those two mystics Grigg features—Ursula Goodenough and Sharman Russell—would surely have received that theologian's imprimatur. It seems more and more fitting that Paulus's ashes were handed to the Dalai Lama, and some sprinkled in the Ganges. Some though were also deserved, I believe, by the Jordan.

Tom Altizer used to recall a smiling Paulus whispering "the real Tillich is the radical Tillich," and when I taught Systematic Theology, Vol. III with Bob Kimball, close to Paulus at Harvard, Bob argued what was authentic in that just-out consummatory Christian tome was the "Death of God." Union bred, I couldn't down this without a mixer. I am nearer Gilkey, whose exposition of the mature Paulus, beginning 80 pages into his Tillich book, is in my judgment the best presentation yet of the full blown Christian intention of our mentor. Its main failing is not to recognize the complementary partial truth of Altizer and Kimball.

AND the truth, one must add, of Irwin. When published in '91, Irwin's Eros Toward the World put me off by crediting too carte blanche Hannah's plaints against Paulus. I overlooked at first the thoroughness with which the book shows the sweeping role of Platonic eros in Paulus's thought at and after Union. Walter Leibrecht had flagged this. Irwin offers nuanced documentation deserving place in any critique of Tillich. For here too was massive exercise of theology of culture, exemplifying as much as "being itself" an openness to thought unprovided by the revelation in Christ. In this case what is adopted from outside Christianity's foundation—originally from Plato's Symposium—is subsumed supplementally into Paulus's fourfold thematizing of love, with agape as norm but eros exalted dynamically. This was in the teeth of Nygren's formidable study of Agape and Eros as mutually exclusive. I remember Gustav Aulen at Union about 1949, fencing uneasily with Paulus about the quarrel with Nygren, who had become Aulen's bishop.

I now grasp as I didn't then how Paulus, beginning to be mutedly older and medicate his angina, was exerting a titanic effort to fuse the two master theologians at home in his head and heart. With Langdon one must agree the effort gelled magnificently, for which the clincher is the three volume Systematic Theology. Don't forget we didn't have anything like all of it during the Union years, only Volume I, that not till summer 1951. There was the handout for philosophical theology—interesting for seeing how far Paulus still was from the finished symphony or the unfinished one! Move over Schubert. Peter John gives us a memo of Paulus seriously wondering in the early fifties whether he shouldn't desist from the impossible systematic commitment and settle accounts with epistemology. Thank the Ground of Being he perseveres with the System. But at Chicago he wistfully thinks of starting over and doing greater justice to world religions. Twenty pages from the end of the Systematic Theology itself he inserts the odd coda on essentialization, hitherto unmentioned, reexposing the jumbo issue of creaturely freedom influencing God. Here fuller orchestration of fourfold love with the unforethinkable power of being is clearly called for.

Langdon's synthesis of Tillich the Christian is more finished than Paulus's was. Those culminating years at Union were egregiously hectic for our hero. You have to infer that from his Frau's memoir, into which we dare not saunter now. Some knew her scorn for Christianity, but the only hint most at Union had of Hannah's domestic woe was her persistent glumness. It was natural though that Paulus often looked besieged, would twiddle paper clips and grit his teeth. He was becoming absurdly overbooked—always ready to counsel throngs of needful, helping refugees, lecturing near and far, pressured to get on with the opus, and scads of other projects incited by widening fame. Despite extracurricular earnings, the Tillichs felt financially pinched in America till Harvard, Hannah's nirvana and his too, though with undying attachment to Union. Paulus couldn't be for me the thesis advisor Rollo May winsomely portrays fifteen years before. I recall an appointment at six one evening. Knocking on the door, sobs were audible. It was opened by John Herman Randall, Jr., from Columbia. Tillich's often sarcastic critic was in tears. He wondered would I please mind coming back, much needing a while longer with his friend.

Doubtless an immense postwar weight was Paulus's solidarity with kith and kin who stayed in the Fatherland. The bond held with Hirsch, who hailed Nazism as a kairos, and Herman Schafft remained best friend, despite living with the New Order. It's a revelation to read Paulus's Travel Diary of '36 where you see the vigorous 50 year old a decade before I met him, touring Europe on holocaust eve, enjoying Paris nightclubs along with scholarly conclaves, swimming when he finds a lake, writing to beloved wife and kids. He poignantly avoided German soil, but argued day and night with friends who came to meet him. Convivial loyalty was steadfast under ideological chasm, and nostalgic pain marked his August birthday, as the anti-Nazi indelibly patriotic German recalled his regiment's band in 1916 saluting their chaplain near blood soaked Verdun. In the late forties disclosures of the barbaric crimes of the Nazi state and Wehrmacht SS made almost daily headlines. Most Americans were appalled at what seemed the shared guilt of Germans subservient to Hitler. This must have been a crucifixion for Paulus, though most at Union had no feel for it, just that his somberness was sometimes melancholic, even with unquenched festivity. During this time he was framing what Gilkey rates as dark a doctrine as we have of human sin, offset only and conjointly by indestructible being-itself and the joyful miracle of the New Being.

The Systematic Theology emerged slowly, under constant harassment, rife with glitches, yet gloriously unique among the prime Christian systems. Gordon Kaufman asked of it "Can one serve two masters?" For me the more telling image is merging them. For the two masters were not outside heteronomously but theonomously inside, shaping the work and person of a dyadic genius. The Roofless Church in New Harmony bespeaks this, even as we honor Jane Owen. Art for her was the cardinal epiphany in which the first pole of Paulus's mastery was expressed, which accords profoundly with him, while culture, philosophy, science, political ethics, Religionsgeschichte and depth psychology likewise serve as synonyms or supplements focusing his humongous range. The wide open sky captures this, as the unroofed church registers his existential roots: so ardently decking the Christmas tree, binding wounds of any he met, proclaiming newness of life, beholding through the pictured Christ a real Jesus as unsurpassable love. Paulus was the enfleshed universal where the poles coalesced. Reread the encomium for Buber, a year before Paulus's own farewell. In early-twenties Berlin the stubborn Jew had taught the heady theologian of culture you can't dispense with the biblical personal God. Paulus praises Buber as his paradigm because the colossal Jew knew how to be free from and free for his own tradition.

Fast forward to Chicago, September '65, the final address. His subject is the history of religions and systematic theology, a nomenclature connoting theology of culture and church theology in 1919. Meanwhile, as the cookie of life crumbled, church theology—systematics—claimed equal status, even became the name of the most labored and most exalted Tillich writing, without though its counterpart—existence radically open to living culture—at all fading out, rebounding rather to the crescendo of Harvard and Chicago. As his career seesawed Paulus melded. Creative integration occurred. But he once warned Barth dialectical theology must not stop being dialectical. Paulus's theology didn't. His last public utterance is the plea for "freedom, both from one's own foundation and for one's own foundation."²⁵ This puzzled Gert Hummel, editing for the *Hauptwerke*. I daresay it puzzles—and challenges—us. But there in a nutshell is the Tillich I knew at Union: irreducibly two top theologians in the uniting dialectic of a matchless mentor.

Thanks and God bless!

Ashland, Oregon, October 2010

¹ Martin Kaehler (1935-1912) German theologian at Halle. Most important work was *The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ*, 1892, 1896; rev. 1956. English translation: 1964.

² Hannah Tillich, Paul Tillich's wife. *From Time to Time*, Stein and Day, 1973.

³ Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) American theologian at Union Theological Seminary 1928-1960. Important works *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 1932 and *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 2 volumes, 1941,1942.

⁴ Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) English mathematician and philosopher. Professor of Philosophy at Harvard 1924-1937. Most important work *Process and Reality*, 1929.

⁵ Regin Prenter (1907-1990) Danish Lutheran priest and theologian. Professor of Dogmatics, Aarhus University, 1945-1972. Important work: *Spiritus Creator: Luther's Concept of the Holy Spirit,* Muhlenberg Press, 1953.

⁶ John Macquarrie (1919-2007) Scottish theologian and philosopher. Important works: *Principles of Christian Theology*, NY: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1966; *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*: Trinity Press International, 1991.

⁷ Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics.* 13 Vols. New York: T & T Clark, 2009.

⁸ Nickname of Richard Wegener.

⁹ Gesammelte Werke Paul Tillich. Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1959-1975. Vol. 13, pp. 41-2.

¹⁰ Georgia Harkness, 1891-19974. Christian theologian in Methodist tradition, she was important in gaining ordination for women and a leading figure in the ecumenical movement. She taught at Garrett Biblical Institute and Pacific School of Religion.

¹¹ Nuovo, Victor. *Über die Idee einer Theologie der Kulture*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987.

¹² Christopher Henry Dawson, 1889-1970. English speaking Roman Catholic historian who wrote widely on cultural history and Christendom. He was compared to Max Weber and widely read in the works of Ernst Troeltsch.

¹³ J. L. Adams, ed. *What is Religion?* p. 178.

¹⁴ Tillich, Paul. System der Wissenschaften, Nach Gegenständen und Methoden. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1981.

¹⁵ Adams, op. cit., p. 157.

¹⁶ Grace Cali, *Paul Tillich, First Hand: A Memoir of the Harvard Years*. Chicago: Exploration Press, 1996, p 20.

¹⁷ Nicholas of Cusa, 1401-1464. German Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church.

¹⁸ Paul Tillich, *Dogmatik: Marburger Vorlesung Von 1925.* Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1986.

¹⁹ Edmond La B. Cherbonnier, 1918 -. Prof. Emeritus, Trinity College. *Hardness of Heart*, NY: Doubleday, 1955.

²⁰ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology.* University of Chicago Press, 1951-1963.

²¹ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be.* Yale University Press, 2000.

²² John Edwin Smith, 1921-2009. Prof. Emeritus, Yale University. *Purpose and Thought: The Meaning of Pragmatism,* New Haven, Yale University Press, 1978.

²³ Rollo May, 1909-1994. American Existential psychologist.

²⁴ Ruth Nanda Ashen, 1900-2003, American philosopher, author and editor of several book series such as the Religious Perspectives Series by Harper and Row.

²⁵ Paul Tilllich, *Main Works/Hauptwerke.* John Clayton, ed. Berlin, New York: 1987. DeGruyter - Evangelisches Verlagswerk GMbH, Vol. 6, p. 441.