Correlating to "Nones:" Tillich's Method of Correlation and Late Modernity

Lawrence A. Whitney, LC†

This essay is, essentially, an exercise in systematic wonder. That wonder is directed in the widest sense toward ongoing adjustments to modern theological methods amidst present tectonic, social, and cultural shifts. On the one hand, Paul Tillich's method of correlation, which was so compelling during the mid-20th century and remains influential in many circles, has declined in terms of its availability to the imagination of most late modern Christians and the wider societies of North America. On the other hand, it is not clear that any other theological approach has become more particularly compelling to the late modern mindset, as demonstrated by recent demographic trends away from "organized religion," i.e., the rise of the "nones." Taken together, these two realities suggest that some new ways of thinking, in conversation with the successes of the past and the pitfalls of the present, may provide a more hopeful prospect for a renewed theological vision for the future.

Tillich's 20th Century Existential Situation

It would be impossible to responsibly give an account of the mid-20th century society and culture from which questions emerged to which Tillich correlated theological answers as though said milieu could plausibly be reduced to a few axioms and characteristics. Rather, a more responsible approach is to briefly articulate the society and culture Tillich understood himself to be addressing. As it turns out, Tillich himself did summarize his understanding of the socio-cultural situation of his time in two axioms and two characteristics. In *Theology of Culture*, Tillich explored "Aspects of a Religious Analysis of Culture," and therein identified "the special character of contemporary culture:" "Our present culture must be described in terms of one predominant movement and an increasingly powerful protest against this movement. The spirit of the predominant movement is the spirit of industrial society. The spirit of the protest is the spirit of the existentialist analysis of man's actual predicament."[1] Industrialism and existentialism, then, are the axioms of Tillich's day.

In addition, there are "two main characteristics of man in industrial society," according to Tillich. "The first of these is the concentration of man's activities upon the methodical investigation and technical transformation of his world, including himself, and the consequent loss of the dimension of depth in his encounter with reality."[2] Second, "in order to fulfill his destiny, man must be in possession of creative powers, analogous to those previously attributed to God, and so creativity must become a human quality."[3] Tillich thus ascribes the characteristics of shallowness and hubris to the industrialist axiom. The existentialist axiom, by contrast, is characterized by meaninglessness and estrangement, which may in turn inspire either a neurotic acceptance of this state of affairs, or a courageous creativity of cultural production that expresses "the destructive trends of contemporary culture."[4] The existentialist axiom, then, is framed by the industrialist, but turns the framework of industrialism into a protest of itself.

One important aspect of Tillich's understanding of the socio-cultural situation that he fails to bring out is its unified and totalizing nature. Industrialism was the axiom of one culture, in Tillich's view, and existentialism is not even really an axiom of a distinct culture, but rather of a prophetic subset of industrialized society. No one could escape from the totalizing worldview of industrial society, as far as Tillich could see. There was good reason for Tillich to believe this. In the wake of the Second World War, there was a great deal of confidence that the progressive agenda of the victors over Nazism and Fascism would carry the day and that peace and prosperity would spread to all corners of the globe. Certainly, communism and socialism still had to be reckoned with, but in a sense, they merely provided a concrete example of what progress would overcome. Even for Tillich's form of existentialism, which is by nature more pessimistic about the value of human progress in itself, there remains an abiding hope that people might overcome their estrangements and live meaningful lives in the new being. This unity of culture meant that there was a commonality of language for expressing and addressing its members. Tillich was particularly enthusiastic about the existentialist language within the industrialist culture as the form of the Christian answer to the industrialist predicament: "The confrontation of the existential analysis with the symbol in which Christianity has expressed its ultimate concern is the method which is adequate both to the message of

Jesus as the Christ and to the human predicament as rediscovered in contemporary culture."[5]

21st Century Existential Situations

It is difficult to express the existential situation of our 21st Century context, not least because the language of existentialism has fallen significantly out of use. Furthermore, the unified social, economic, political, ethical, philosophical, and artistic norms, values, and worldview have largely broken down, or at least the diversity that underlay the supposed unity that Tillich described has been revealed. There are large portions of the human population that have been left out of not only the technical advances of industrialism but also the political, economic, and social advances of late modern societies. Even in supposedly industrialized or "developed" societies, the full flowering of the promises of the progressive vision have not blossomed as pervasively as anticipated. The ongoing challenges of gender equality both in the United States and around the globe may be the starkest example of this gap between the progressive promise of the mid-20th century and the real human predicament of the present moment, although there are many others including those revolving around race, tribe, religion, and sexual orientation. Existentialism as Tillich posited it pointed to some degree to the ways in which the industrialist vision broke down and in many cases crushed the human spirit in the name of improving human life. The limitation of this existentialist vision, however, is its individualism, focusing as it does on the estrangement of the human subject from its ground. This analysis of the individual human being is then cast as the predicament or situation of all humans generally, thus making existentialism yet another unified, totalizing enterprise. By contrast, the 21st Century axioms of postmodernism and pluralism emphasize the incredibility and implausibility of singular and totalizing analyses, and the integrity of communities that make up societies without being entirely subsumed under them, respectively.

Postmodernism is frequently defined, with Jean-Francois Lyotard, as "incredulity toward meta-narratives."[6] What this means is that the current socio-cultural framework infects its inhabitants with an allergy toward grand arcs of interpretation that subsume everything under a single heading. Postmodernists give voice to alternative narratives of a single event to point out the irreducibility of life and the human experience. Rather than a human being having a singular identity, human experience is of multiple evolving and shifting identities over time. Rather than history demonstrating an inevitable evolution toward a particular end, multiple histories evolve and devolve, intersect and dissect, toward variable and oftentimes contradictory ends. Perhaps most importantly, there is nowhere for any individual human being to stand to identify all of the myriad histories and identities and their intersections in order to tell the story of the whole. The result is that the very notion of providing an analysis of "the human situation" in general becomes untenable.

The second axiom of the contemporary context, pluralism, is in a sense derived from the first. Pluralism can be defined sociologically as the state of affairs in which multiple communities, each made up of multiple identities, intersect with increasing frequency and intensity. Philosophically, pluralism might be defined as the productive interaction of such communities. In both cases, pluralism recognizes the real differences that obtain among the communities and individuals in question, a la postmodernism. Furthermore, pluralism also borrows from postmodernism an allergy toward univocal truth claims, preferring instead to acknowledge the possibility of multiple truths, particularly with regard to ethics and religious and cultural beliefs. Pluralism goes further, however, in insisting on the integrity of the communities in question as valuable in various ways in their own rights such that the ongoing maintenance of the variety of communities should be a societal and cultural priority.

The upshot of postmodernism and pluralism with regard to the 21st century existential situation is that there is no singular 21st century existential situation but rather a plurality of existential situations. The postmodern incredulity toward meta-narratives resists any attempt to provide a unified, totalizing account of the human situation in general. Pushed to its extreme, postmodernism would leave culture with absolutely no common cultural norms and practices, relativizing every aspect of human subjectivity and denying any grounds for valuation. Pluralism resists this extremism by insisting that communities do have an integrity that is valuable, particularly over against the universalizing tendencies of more dominant cultural norms and values. It is notable that the case to be made here is not that either of these socio-cultural frameworks is necessarily true, given that on their own terms there would be no ground from which to evaluate their veracity, but rather that they are deeply prevalent in the present socio-cultural

moment. The result is that these cultural frameworks leave societies without a common set of cultural practices that might give rise to a common framing of the existential questions to which theological answers might be correlated. This leaves systematic theologians with a challenging conundrum: how do you answer an unposed question?

The Rise of the "Nones"

This broader cultural analysis can be brought into focus by narrowing the field of vision to a particular emerging social phenomenon, namely the rise of the "nones." Far from indicating an explosion of interest in cloistered religious life, the rise of the "nones," as recently demographically attested in a report by the Pew Forum on Religion and American Public Life,[7] is a movement away from all forms of "organized religion." The term "none" refers to someone who, when asked about their religious affiliation, responds by checking the box marked "none." Correlated with other data in the survey in question, it becomes clear that the vast majority of these "nones" are neither atheists nor agnostics, but rather they identify as "spiritual but not religious," or believe in God, and in some cases pray regularly, but apart from any wider religious movement or organization.

At first glance, it might seem that disaffiliation is, in effect, a claim that there simply are no questions to which a theological answer might be considered adequate or compelling. This hypothesis, however, is belied by the fact that the "nones" are not disaffiliating from God or the prospects of theology so much as they are disaffiliating from the institutions of religion. Thus, the "nones" seem to suffer from a plethora of questions coupled with skepticism toward communal answers, likely due to the hypocrisy of religious institutions so publicly on display, particularly in the face of the public insistence of their own righteousness by at least some such institutions. The rise of the "nones" may be diagnosed as a sign of the dearth of adequate and compelling answers to the myriad and yet highly particular and specific questions arising in late modern societies. Simultaneously, the "nones" arose out of the socio-cultural milieu of postmodernism and pluralism, which call into question the adequacy of any answers offered by anyone other than themselves. It is not merely religious institutions that are questionable, due to questionable morality and reliability, but rather the "nones" are incredulous toward institutions and authority in general.

The rise of the "nones"—those moving out of religious affiliation—is mirrored within religious bodies by the rise of the "nominals"—those who remain affiliated but with a much weaker commitment than might have been expected a generation ago.[8] The concept of the "nominals" is more challenging because what qualifies as commitment has never been entirely clear and is brought to the interpretive work by the researcher as opposed to being objectively verifiable from the questionnaire itself. (There is no box on the survey for "noncommittal"). Nonetheless, there is a common characteristic between the "nones" and the "nominals": both cohorts, one within and one outside of religious institutions, understand their members themselves to be not only the final but in fact the only, and likely lonely, arbiters of what constitutes an adequate spiritual life.

Notably, the data from the Pew Forum survey seems to suggest that the rise of the "nones" and the "nominals" is not merely a giving over to the postmodern malaise, although there is plenty to suggest that the particular form of individualism that postmodernism can inspire is at play in these sociological phenomena. In fact, there is some data to indicate that at least some of the "nones" and "nominals" wish that religious institutions were better at addressing their existential situation. For example, 78% of the religiously unaffiliated believe that religious organizations "bring people together and strengthen community bonds," and 77% believe that religious organizations "play an important role in helping the poor and needy." The complaint seems more to be that religious organizations are just not answering the existential questions that are arising among this significant segment of the population. 70% of the unaffiliated believe religious organizations "are too concerned with money and power," 67% believe they "focus too much on rules," and 67% believe they "are too involved with politics."[9] At the same time, 68% of the unaffiliated believe in God or a universal spirit.[10] The complaint, then, is that religious organizations are attempting to answer questions that are outside their purview. Rather than correlating theological answers to existential questions, the "nones" and the "nominals" are observing that religious institutions are overly concerned with attempting to provide answers to mundane questions.[11] The remainder of this essay wonders about what it would be like for theology and religious in-

stitutions to return to addressing existential questions.

Toward a Renewal of Theology

If this analysis is accurate, that the rise of the "nones" and the emergence of the "nominals" is a sign of inadequately addressed existential questions amidst a general cultural skepticism of broadly and commonly accepted answers, then the age is ripe for a renewal of theology. This renewal might begin with Tillich's approach to systematic theology in terms of the method of correlation: "The method of correlation explains the contents of the Christian faith through existential questions and theological answers in mutual interdependence…"[12] Tillich further explains that, "in using the method of correlation, systematic theology proceeds in the following way: it makes an analysis of the human situation out of which the existential questions arise, and it demonstrates that the symbols used in the Christian message are the answers to these questions."[13] In turn, "the analysis of the human situation employs materials made available by man's creative self-interpretation in all realms of culture. Philosophy contributes, but so do poetry, drama, the novel, therapeutic psychology, and sociology."[14] A summary of the method of correlation, then, might be that questions arise from the human predicaments of life as articulated in their socio-cultural frameworks, and theological answers are given out of the Christian symbols.

Furthermore, it is helpful to consider the nature of system for Tillich, that is, what makes systematic theology systematic, which may be found in his consideration of "the rational character of systematic theology."[15] There are three forms of rationality that apply to systematic theology for Tillich: semantic rationality, logical rationality, and methodological rationality. "The principle of semantic rationality involves the demand that all connotations of a word should consciously be related to each other and centered around a controlling meaning."[16] Logical rationality "refers first of all to the structures which determine any meaningful discourse and which are formulated in the discipline of logic."[17] This definition is somewhat circular in Tillich's statement, using "the discipline of logic" to define logic, but refers nonetheless to the factor of coherence, namely that terms are always used in the same way. Finally, and most important for Tillich's understanding of the nature of system, methodological rationality re-

fers to an established method "carried through rationally and consistently." "It is the function of the systematic form to guarantee the consistency of cognitive assertions in all realms of methodical knowledge."[18] These criteria of coherence and consistency are most called into question with regard to Tillich's notion of system as a result of shifts in the socio-cultural frameworks for understanding the questions that arise from culture.

For Tillich, writing at a time when the existential questions could be stated in as systematic a fashion as the theological answers, these criteria made a great deal of sense. The present context is far more fractured and diverse than Tillich's context, or at least the context Tillich understood himself to be addressing, and so the existential questions that arise are in many ways incommensurate. The question of being for a poor, single mother of five in a *favela* in Brazil is not the same question of being for a middle-class, married father of one in the United States. The things that cause and might resolve their estrangements and anxieties are different, and those differences matter, requiring different responses. A singular, coherent, and consistent response to both questions would be looked upon skeptically for the very reason that, to the postmodern mind, the answer must be leaving something out, and what is left out is likely to be crucial. Instead, theological answers to the existential questions of the present require a more narrow tailoring to the precise contours of the questions as they are posed. This may result in answers that are incoherent and inconsistent with respect to each other, but this makes sense given that in the method of correlation the answer is always given in the form, albeit not necessarily the content, of the question.[19] At the same time, even the postmodern mind is likely to look askance at theological answers that are incoherent and inconsistent within their response to a single existential question. This is to say that the field of applicability in which systematic theology operates is significantly narrowed, and the broader scope requires a greater tolerance for vagueness, that is, "the inapplicability of the principal of contradiction such that it might obtain to mutually exclusive instances."[20]

Even as the very nature of system must be reconsidered, so too must the viability of explicitly Christian symbols to correlate the content of revelation with the existential situation of the human person.[21] For Tillich, the Christian symbols retained the power to do this, and he believed that the Christian symbols were superior to the symbols of other relig-

ions in correlating revelation and situation effectively. The experience of pluralism, in which the integrity of a variety of communities is respected, honored, and valued at least calls the superiority of Christian symbols into question. Furthermore, the historic sensibility of superiority among many Christians leads many in the presently pluralistic context to discount the Christian symbols for being tainted by having arisen amidst this superiority complex. In Tillich's language, the revelatory situation has changed, and so this is a time in which he says, "theology can become prophesy, and in this role it may contribute to a change in the revelatory situation."[22] This move to the prophetic is no simple task, as "one cannot arbitrarily 'make' a religious symbol out of a segment of secular reality. Not even the collective unconscious, the great symbol-creating sources, can do this."[23] This being the case, Tillich was worried that "in a secular culture both the symbols for God and the theonomous character of the material from which the symbols are taken disappear."[24]

The 68% of the "nones," and a presumably even higher percentage of the "nominals," belie the wholesale loss of the theonomous from culture, but rather indicate at least some desire for a truer theonomy. Here it may be helpful to borrow from Tillich's contemporary, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and his conception of "religionless Christianity:"

> If religion is only a garment of Christianity— and even this garment has looked very different at different times—what is religionless Christianity?… How do we speak of God—without religion?… In what way are we religionless-secular Christians, in what way are we the ekklesia, those called forth, not regarding ourselves from a religious point of view as specially favored, but rather as belonging wholly to the world?[25]

What Bonhoeffer seems to mean by "religion" is the symbolic terms that make up particularly religious language. In other words, he is wondering how we speak of God without using the word "god." Bonhoeffer suggests that the way to learn to speak in such a way is by becoming immersed in, "belonging wholly to," the world. Tillich has a similar recommendation, which he calls "the mystical element": "When we recognize the loss of a symbol we cannot say, 'Let's try to replace it.' Symbols cannot be invented; they cannot be produced intentionally. But perhaps the mystical element may be the way that a different sort of Protestantism, a non-moralistic and non-intellectualistic Protestantism, may return to some of the positive elements in Catholicism."[26]

Tillich is here responding to a question about how to recover the vitality of a tradition that gets lost when a symbol dies. He is pointing to the mystical element as a way of recovering some vitality that was lost in Protestantism from the death of the symbol of Mary from Catholicism and the moralization and intellectualization of the symbol of grace. For Tillich, this mystical element must always give voice to the theonomy it encounters in the language of the culture in which it speaks, and so the mystic must become a religionless Christian, belonging wholly to the world, in order to acquire the symbols that might newly correlate revelation with situation. This is what it would mean for theology to be prophetic.

Of course, the prophetic role of the theologian for Tillich is more than simply the work of acquiring new symbols for theonomous reality. It is also the work contributing to a change in the revelatory situation. Theologically, the rise of the "nones" and the "nominals" is a symbol of the declining sensibility for the revelatory character in the human situation. This declining sensibility is in part linked to the supposed incredibility or implausibility of large cultural projects in the postmodern framework. One prophetic role for bringing about a change in the revelatory situation, then, would be to demonstrate the viability and vitality of a large cultural project or projects. The best way to do this is simply to build a large cultural project. *Esse* proves *posse*: the existence of a thing proves its possibility. If it exists, it is possible and plausible. As Howard Thurman said, "meaningful and creative experiences between peoples can be more compelling than all of the ideas, concepts, faiths, fears, ideologies, and prejudices that divide them."[27] Tillich emphasized that it is in significant part cultural productions that theologians analyze in order to determine the existential questions to which they correlate theological answers. The prophetic work of theology, then, is in part to encourage and participate in these cultural productions on such a scale and scope of meaning and creativity that they may overcome the divisions to which the postmodern mindset relegates the human situation. This renewed production in turn is the world in which religionless Christians, and religionless theologians, should immerse themselves in order to discern the symbols that will correlate revelation with situation. And this new correlation may in turn allow for a broader level of systematic reflection that

would be acceptable across cultural contexts able to recognize in one another a common ground. Perhaps one day the human community will even return to recognizing a common ground of being.

---

[1] Tillich, Paul. *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959): 43.

[2] ibid.

[3] ibid: 44.

[4] ibid: 46.

[5] ibid: 49.

[6] Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

[7] The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. "'Nones' on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation." (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2012). <http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx>.

[8] Cathy Lynn Grossman. "Religious 'Nominals' Drifting Away From Mainstream Judaism And Christianity" *The Huffington Post*. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/05/religious-nominals-judaism-christianity_n_4032592.html>.

[9] The Pew Forum. "'Nones' on the Rise." op. cit.: 23.

[10] ibid: 22.

[11] This analysis contrasts sharply with the section of the Pew Forum report entitled "Some Theories About Root Causes of the Rise of the Unaffiliated," as it seeks to provide a theological theory for the rise of the unaffiliated whereas the report offers only sociological explanations.

[12] Tillich, Paul. *Systematic Theology: Volume One*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951): 60. Of course, Tillich would note that the method of correlation is not really his, as systematic theology has always used the method of correlation, "sometimes more, sometimes less, consciously, and must do so consciously and outspokenly, especially if the apologetic point of view is to prevail."

[13] ibid: 61.

[14] ibid: 63.

[15] Ibid: 53.

[16] ibid: 55.

[17] ibid: 56.

[18] ibid: 58.

[19] Tillich. *Systematic Theology*. op. cit.: 64.

[20] C.S. Peirce, "Issues of Pragmaticism," *The Essential Peirce* vol. 2 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 351.

[21] ibid: 240.

[22] ibid.

[23] ibid: 241.

[24] ibid.

[25] Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, trans. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Touchstone, 1971): 280-81.

[26] Brown, D. Mackenzie. *Ultimate Concern: Tillich in Dialogue*. (New York: Harper & Row: 1965): 149.

[27] Thurman, Howard, *The Search for Common Ground*.

If you have presented a paper to the annual meeting of the North American Paul Tillich Society or the AAR Tillich Group in 2012 or 2013 and it has not been published, please send a copy to the editor for publication in the Fall number of the Bulletin. Since this is privately circulated, publishing a paper here does not conflict with publication elsewhere. Thank you.