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# Bulletin

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## Editor's Note

Verna Marina Ehret

### What a Year

The last couple of years have been a tremendous challenge for many of us. An ever-evolving pandemic has disrupted personal and professional lives, goals, and relationships. The intense global political polarization has created tremendous challenges for governance and international relations. Russia's invasion of Ukraine this spring has brought to the forefront of religious discussions of the role of religion in violence, where the Russian Orthodox Church through Patriarch Kirill has sanctioned this war as a holy act, while Ukrainian Orthodox leadership have solidified their disassociation with the Russian church (See Surzhko-Harned "Russian World and Ukrainian Autocephaly: Religious Narratives in Anti-Colonial Nationalism of Ukraine" *Religions* 13:5). The continued systemic social justice problems nationally and internationally gnaw at our consciences. In all of this we see active engagement with the questions of religion throughout the public domain. From social media to public scholarship in outlets such as *Religion Dispatches* and *The Conversation*, the general population is struggling to make meaning in the anxieties of our current age. Our conference this year centers discussions of Christology. I offer two questions for you all to think about as we prepare for our fall meeting. How can a Tillichian understanding of Christology reach beyond academia to speak to the challenges of our world, and what is the responsibility of academics to engage the current social and political challenges we face? In the essays that follow you will find thought-provoking examples of thinking with Tillich about the contemporary issues of Mountain Top Removal, the postdigital sublime, and antiracism.

### The Annual Meeting

The NAPTS annual meeting this year will take place in Denver, Colorado on Friday, November 18, 2022, immediately prior to the start of the AAR and SBL national meetings. The executive committee is hard at work putting together the program for this year. The call for papers went out through the Google

group in April, but for any who missed it, I have provided it here.

For its 2022 Annual Meeting, the North American Paul Tillich Society seeks papers for the study of the Christology of Paul Tillich. The study can be localized into, but not limited by, the four following different fields:

1. The comparison or discussion with other contemporary theological visions on Christology within Christianity.
2. Working through the enduring significance of the tension between the historical Jesus and the believed Christ in Tillich's work.
3. The Interreligious debate on the meaning of Jesus Christ and his significance for salvation, as well as whether this aspect of Tillich's thought is in tension with his staunch metaphysical claim that God is being itself, not a being. Religious pluralists, comparative and interreligious theologians would be welcome!
4. The practical significance and values of the contended Christology of Paul Tillich to the world today.

Apart from the Christology of Paul Tillich, papers on other topics that are timely and intended to advance the contemporary development of Tillichian studies are also welcomed.

To propose a paper for one of these panels, please submit an abstract of no more than 350 words and a CV to Ilona Nord ([Ilona.nord@uni-wuerzburg.de](mailto:Ilona.nord@uni-wuerzburg.de)). The deadline has been extended to **July 15**.

Authors of accepted papers will be notified by **July 30, 2022**. Submissions of a proposal indicates agreement to submit a full paper draft by November 1<sup>st</sup> for pre-circulation among the Society members in preparation for the panels.

Panel presentations will be limited in order to privilege time for Q&A and discussion of the pre-circulated papers.

**NOTE:** If you presented at the 2020 or 2021 meetings and have not yet sent your essay for publication in the Bulletin or have other news to share, please send it to [vehret@mercyhurst.edu](mailto:vehret@mercyhurst.edu) for inclusion in the next issue. The publication of your essay in the *Bulletin* does not prevent you from also publishing your essay elsewhere.

## Articles

### Losing One's Place: Mountaintop Removal Mining and Place in Paul Tillich's Theology of Estrangement

Matt Bickett

#### Introduction

Coal mining in part defines central Appalachia in the American imagination. Generations of Appalachian miners have descended into the dark and returned home covered in coal dust, holding modest paychecks. Coal mining has always been dangerous, but has more recently come above ground to incorporate especially appalling practices. A new generation of mining coal from the surfaces of mountains, called Mountaintop Removal Mining, poses a threat to the Appalachian landscape and way of life. However, confronted with the horrifying effects of Mountaintop Removal Mining, American national politics reflects both the enthusiastic encouragement of destructive Mountaintop Removal Mining and the totally silent inaction of potential opponents. As a political, economic, environmental, and human rights atrocity, the practice of Mountaintop Removal Mining expresses the evils of the human condition.

In this paper, I analyze the practice of Mountaintop Removal Mining in relationship to Paul Tillich's ontological theology in order to evaluate the utility of Tillich's ontology around three sites: decolonial thought, place, and Appalachian identity. I first briefly survey analyses of Tillich's thought alongside postcolonial and decolonial thought of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. I then look to recent developments in decolonial thought that emerge from attempts to write about and contest the atrocities of Mountaintop Removal Mining in the Appalachian region. Finally, I show the limits and promise of comparing decolonial understandings of place and Tillich's discussion of space in the state of estrangement. I end by asking how Tillich's theology

might help in thinking about a place-conscious theological answer to the question of Appalachian existence. Dues information is at the end of issue.

#### Tillich and Decolonial Critique

Scholars writing from various postcolonial and decolonial perspectives have identified colonial projects embedded in Western cultural productions, the epistemological foundations of Western thought, and the West's ontological understandings. Analyses of cultural colonial investments, especially in literature, came to prominence in the area of postcolonialism. Postcolonial challenges to Western conceptions of culture, however, do not preclude the usefulness of Tillich's theology of culture, as Russell Manning shows. In arguing for the continued relevance of Tillich's theology of culture for contemporary theology, Manning summarizes that "Tillich opens the possibility of a genuine engagement with culture as it is conceived by postcolonialism beyond the false universalisms of colonial reason to the ultimate ground of meaning."<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, Tillich's theory of religious symbolism remains useful in theology's overcoming of the universalizing epistemology of coloniality, according to Carlos Alberto Motta Cunha. Cunha finds hope for the decolonization of theological thought in Tillich's refiguring of Christian concepts, such that a Tillichian refiguring might overcome the association of these concepts with Europe's dominating colonial power in modernity/coloniality.<sup>2</sup> As evidenced in Tillich's own struggle with the symbols and language necessary for describing God as the power of being itself, colonial language cannot encompass the infinity of God and points to the limits of monolingual theology.<sup>3</sup> For Cunha, the impossibility of naming God as the power of being itself precludes God's legitimate association with the tyrannical god of European colonial domination. In this way, Tillich's method of correlation provides resources for critiquing modernity/coloniality in Christian theology.

<sup>1</sup> Russel Manning, "Theology of Culture after Postcolonialism," in *North American Paul Tillich Society Newsletter* 28 (Spring 2002), 31.

<sup>2</sup> Carlos Alberto Motta Cunha, "A contribuição da teoria do simbolismo religioso de Paul Tillich à teologia

decolonial," in *Revista Eletrônica Correlatio* 17 (June 2018), 76.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 78.

Manning and Cunha show how Tillich's theology can be a useful partner in postcolonial cultural critiques and decolonial epistemological critiques of Western theology. Might Tillich continue to be helpful given recent decolonial critiques of the West's ontological understanding? The case of Mountaintop Removal Mining in the Appalachian region raises the stakes of this question, as the next section demonstrates. In the final section, I show the possibilities and limits of Tillich's theology given the decolonial critique of Western ontological understanding that emerges from Appalachians' experience of Mountaintop Removal Mining in the region.

### Mountaintop Removal and Place

A brief overview of Mountaintop Removal Mining (MTR) in the Appalachian region serves to clarify the object of my analysis. Investors and coal company executives, operating under the regime of global capitalism, simultaneously provide the material capital for continuing MTR and evangelize the ideological distortions of space and place that justify the practice to politicians and to local workers. MTR involves blasting up to 400 vertical feet of mountaintop to expose seams of coal while trucks dump the loosened waste rock into nearby streams and cart away the coal to be sold for billions of dollars in profits.<sup>4</sup> Coal companies destroy over 500 mountaintops, spill cancerous sludge into Appalachians' drinking water, and poison their air with ultra-fine blast particles.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, these companies funnel profits to global investors and continuously lower wages and remove protections for local workers.

The description of MTR above reflects two competing conceptions of place. First, scientific rationality understands place in its relationship to

objectified space. In this line of thought, space is fixed and a given. Appalachian scholar Barbara Ellen Smith writes, "events happen in space, but space itself is not produced."<sup>6</sup> Space acts as the backdrop or grid on which all places become reduced to undifferentiated points or coordinates.<sup>7</sup> Because space passively awaits modernization, place exists only in "its role in the process of 'development,' its potential contribution to a seemingly inevitable progression toward modernity."<sup>8</sup> Supported by scientific rationality, globalization claims that places exist as temporary resources for use in the domination and development of space. The process of modernization, then, destroys place as place recedes into placelessness.<sup>9</sup> The case of MTR, as indicative of all resource extraction in the region, exemplifies this dynamic best. Additionally, placelessness contributes to other injustices in Appalachia like the opioid crisis and intergenerational poverty.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, Appalachian Studies scholars and Christian activists adopt a vision of place as a set of social relations grounded in ecology and topography—place constructed in a location.<sup>11</sup> The socialized conception of place presents place as a set of social relations "stretched out," and grounded from below by specific, local ecological and topographical features and with "flexible and porous boundaries."<sup>12</sup> In the socially constructed understanding of place, a place-based consciousness emerges. Place-based consciousness contributes to and participates in the humanity of those who construct and are grounded in a place. Placelessness dehumanizes Appalachians while place-based consciousness recognizes their humanity.

I propose that place-based consciousness can find a home in decolonial ontology through its relation to

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Saadoun, *The Coal Mine Next Door: How the US Government's Deregulation of Mountaintop Removal Threatens Public Health* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2018), ii, 1. I describe here only the local disastrous effects of MTR; unsustainable energy sources also contribute to the global environmental crisis.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Ellen Smith, "Transforming Places: Toward a Global Politics of Appalachia" in *Appalachia in Regional Contexts: Place Matters* (Louisville: University of Kentucky Press, 2018): 53.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Arif Dirlik, "Place-Based Imagination: Globalism and the Politics of Place" in *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 22, no. 2 (1999): 155.

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Ellen Smith and Stephen L. Fisher, "Conclusion: Transformations in Place" *Transforming Places: Lessons from Appalachia*, edited by Stephen L. Fisher and Barbara Ellen Smith (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 270–272.

<sup>11</sup> Dirlik, 155.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

land. Place-based consciousness should not conflate place with land but must associate place with land through a grounding in ecology and topography. Native American Indigenous Studies scholars Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang provide a clear definition of land useful for a place-based consciousness:

Within settler colonialism, the most important concern is land/water/air/subterranean earth (land, for shorthand in this article). Land is what is most valuable, contested, required. This is both because the settlers make Indigenous land their new home and source of capital, and also because the disruption of Indigenous relationship to land represents a profound epistemic, ontological, and cosmological violence. This violence is not temporally contained in the arrival of the settler but is reasserted each day of occupation.<sup>13</sup>

Surface-level analogies between Indigenous land/water/air/subterranean earth and the mountaintops that defines the Appalachian region might be appealing to the dispossessed whites of the region—for example, by equating the literal disappearance of the Appalachian region that comes about by MTR to the violent occupation of Indigenous land. However, Tuck and Yang would reassert that Appalachians are themselves settlers on Indigenous land.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, place-based consciousness must support decolonial ontology by recognizing land as a constitutive part of the ontological model itself. Place itself cannot be said to exist except through a grounding in land, as land itself constitutes the possibility of both the survival of human beings and the possibility of their social relations that construct place.

### **Tillich and a Place-Conscious Theological Answer to Appalachian Existence**

<sup>13</sup> Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” in *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1 (2012), 5. I follow Tuck and Yang in using the term land as a shorthand for land/water/air/subterranean earth.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Pearson also criticizes Appalachian Studies scholars for applying a model of colonialism to the region in an effort to indigenize Appalachians. See

The existential question raised by placelessness as seen in MTR both parallels and diverges from Tillich’s account of spatial contingency in volume two of his *Systematic Theology*. Tillich defines spatial contingency as the experience of space “without a necessary place to which man [sic] belongs.”<sup>15</sup> However, place used in Tillich’s definition and the place understood in place-based consciousness function differently. Whereas the place of place-based consciousness recognizes the cultural embeddedness and land-groundedness of place, Tillich’s use of place here more closely aligns to the place of scientific rationality, as an ultimately interchangeable subcategory of fixed space—as a coordinate on the grid of space. In this way, Tillich’s place is an object to which a person relates whereas place-based consciousness proposes place as those relationships that constitute place itself.

At the same time, Tillich’s use of place does not result in the same understanding of place as that understood in global capitalism’s justification of MTR. Global capitalism sees place only as an element to be seized for modernizing progress, whereas Tillich’s use of place in spatial contingency denotes the physical, sociological, and psychological object to which a person relates in their experience of space. While avoiding a capitalist developmental orientation, Tillich’s place fails to account for the specificities of locality—land, ecology, topography, social and cultural construction—essential to a decolonial place-based consciousness. Tillich’s theological answer to spatial contingency, which he calls the “eternal here,” therefore does not fully account for the challenge of a decolonial ontology.<sup>16</sup>

Given the differences between Tillich’s account of estrangement in space and decolonial discussions of place, how might Tillich’s theology help in thinking about a theological answer to the question of placelessness in Appalachian existence? First, Tillich’s discussion of estrangement shows the

Stephen Pearson, “‘The Last Bastion of Colonialism’: Appalachian Settler Colonialism and Self-Indigenization” in *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 37 (2013): 165–184.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol. 2: Existence and the Christ* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1957): 69.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

possibility nestled in this aspect of his system. While Tillich's system cannot theorize every possible nuance of estrangement in the categories of finitude, the openness of his description of estrangement allows for analyzing MTR and placelessness as evil even if on terms foreign to Tillich's system. Second, the clarity and comprehensiveness of Tillich's engagement with the European metaphysical tradition in his system can position his ontological theology as a representative of this tradition in its engagement with the alternative, contesting, and incommensurable ontologies of recent decolonial thought. Serious Euro-American Christian theological engagement with the ontological challenges of decolonial thought depends on an ontological self-understanding, toward which the three volumes of Tillich's *Systematic Theology* helpfully point.

Finally, a Tillichian theological method—grounded in his theology of revelation and reason, his theological epistemology, and his method of correlation—can serve as a guide for the theo-ethical construction of Christian alternatives to placelessness and MTR in Appalachia. Reading decolonial perspectives on place alongside Tillich's account of estrangement, a kind of Appalachian theology might take up Tillich's method of correlation in ways similar to other constructive theologians inspired by the method of correlation like James Cone. The atrocities of MTR and the estrangement of placelessness prompt a kind of Appalachian theology to find a way forward in place-conscious engagement with Tillich's ontological theology and its method of correlation.

## **Towards a Postdigital Sublime: Tillich's Principle of Sublimity as Resource for Encountering Transcendence in the World of Digital Technology**

Eric Trozzo

### **Introduction**

Emily Brady has, in her constructive retrieval of 18<sup>th</sup> century conceptions of the sublime, argued that historically there have been three routes or types of

encounters in which the sublime can be accessed. These are the aesthetic, the ethical, and nature. To this, I wish to argue for a fourth area: the postdigital. Moreover, I suggest that the postdigital sublime is a space in which the "divine" or the "transcendent" might be encountered, thus giving a space for a postdigital theology. In this paper, I more specifically intend to consider how Paul Tillich's thought on the sublime might be a resource for a concept of the postdigital sublime.

### **The Postdigital and the Sublime**

The term "postdigital" can be traced in the arts to the 1990s, and has taken on a variety of meanings since then. My concern is with the increasingly interdisciplinary conversation that has emerged in the past few years initially coming out of the field of critical pedagogy. Within this movement, the term finds inspiration in Nicholas Negroponte's claim, "Face it—the digital revolution is over," in his 1998 article "Beyond Digital" in *Wired* magazine.<sup>17</sup> In this stream of thought, postdigital theory holds that we are past the point where a meaningful distinction between digital and nondigital can be made, and indeed such separation has always been an artificial division. That is, the effects of digital technologies are so deeply embedded in every aspect not only of human lives but also all aspects of the world. Further, digital technologies cannot be considered apart from the infrastructures that support them, ranging from the production of materials, the labor that maintains the continuing operation of the technologies, the energy production that powers it all, the effect on emotional well-being and affect produced in engagement with digital technologies, and the nature of relationships enabled by digital technologies all must be included. The "post" in postdigital does not suggest that we have moved in linear progression past a digital phase, but rather that the digital is always embedded in larger structures and cannot properly be considered outside of that broader context.

Digital technologies, in postdigital thought, not only participate in the broader context but also helped to create that context while also shaping perceptions of

<sup>17</sup> Negroponte, N. (1998). Beyond digital. *Wired*, January 12. Retrieved from

<http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/6.12/negroponte.html>

it. Digital technologies uniquely mediate and shape human interactions. Data analysis reveals patterns previously hidden from human comprehension. Artificial intelligence helps track the matrix of possibilities that human intelligence could not accomplish on its own. Data and algorithms work together to reveal the world in new ways and to open up new potentialities for it. Digital technologies are understood in an embodied sense in which they are seen to be embedded within every aspect not just of humanity but of all dimensions of life to which we have access.

Another aspect specific to the term “postdigital” that I find to be important is its political dimension. Petar Jandrić is a leading figure in the recent emergence of postdigital conversations. One of his early attempts to define postdigitalism is, “The postdigital is hard to define; messy; unpredictable; digital and analog; technological and non-technological; biological and informational. The postdigital is both a rupture in our existing theories and their continuation. However, such messiness seems to be inherent to the contemporary human condition.”<sup>18</sup>In that early attempt, he saw postdigital thought to require conversation between socio-materialist theory, art, biology, and critical pedagogy in challenging the destructive drive of bio-informational capitalism within the Anthropocene era and bringing forth an alternative vision. Recently, he has revised this call, adding that within this critical need to work at a planetary level, religion plays a critical role.<sup>19</sup> Essential to postdigital theory is a multidisciplinary prophetic call to an urgent liberative action for healing that cannot be confined to the human, but rather must speak into the interconnections of life.

Over the past two years I have been working in a variety of venues to outline a possible approach to a postdigital theology in engagement with the conversations fostered by Jandrić. The key question that thus far I have been working to address is how

we might speak of the “divine” or the “transcendent” within a postdigital framework.

The four elements that I find to be key to framing a postdigital theology are:

1. Postdigital theology is not about online content, but rather planetary interconnections.
2. Relatedly, as I have mentioned, the “post-” in postdigital is not a chronological term. Rather, it signals a moving beyond the binary of digital and non-digital. For me, postdigital indicates that we have always been postdigital, down to our fingers and toes (our digits). This embodied digitalism is not casual, but rather constitutive of a postdigital context in which the technological, the organic, and the psychological are continually mutually creating and shaping one another.
3. Postdigital theory is a materialist approach addressing issues of nexus between the digital revolution, climate change, and species die-off. It is concerned with the complex interaction of life in its broadest sense, recognizing a sense of subjectivity that extends not just beyond the human but beyond the organic, and includes forms of the technological.
4. Postdigital theologies are always multiple in that they speak into and out of a multi-subject matrix. A postdigital theology is always understood to be but one perspective.

Within these elements, my question again is how to speak of the divine or transcendent within such a complex materialist framework. In my broader attempt to speak of the theological within the postdigital, I have turned to the concept of the sublime, drawing particularly on Brady’s work.

Rather than proposing a direct definition of the sublime, Brady first traces the development of the concept in the Western tradition, then from that basis considers “those qualities and experiences which characterize what we might call its ‘paradigm cases.’”<sup>20</sup> She identifies the core characteristics of

<sup>18</sup>Jandrić, P., Knox, J., Besley, T., Ryberg, T., Suoranta, J., & Hayes, S. (2018). Postdigital science and education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 50, 893–899.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2018.1454000>.

<sup>19</sup> See Peter McLaren and Petar Janric, *Postdigital Dialogues: On Critical Pedagogy, Liberation Theology*

and *Information Technology*, (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 255.

<sup>20</sup> Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 117.

the discussions of the sublime as including an immense scale or vastness (mathematical sublime), great power (dynamic sublime), and an overwhelming emotional response to the experience that contains a strong element of anxiety or negativity but ultimately felt as exhilarating and pleasurable.<sup>21</sup>

Wildness constitutes another major aspect of the sublime. She notes that while the themes of form, order, and harmony were central to classical conceptions of beauty, the sublime functioned as a challenge to this focus on order. The sublime spoke to a more uncontrolled sense of aesthetic engagement with the world. In her own constructive contribution Brady focuses on an environmental sublime. For her, it is only in encountering the more-than-human world that both the vastness of the mathematical sublime and the immense power of the dynamic sublime can be found.

The mixed emotional response and sense of mystery are the remaining key elements of Brady's sense of the sublime to consider. The simultaneous sense of horror and pleasure is a significant part of sublimity. The uncontrolled dimension of the sublime makes it in some sense dangerous. The sublime presents an existential threat, whether to one's life or one's way of being. This is exhilarating in that it opens new possibilities, but anxiety-producing in its disruption. This simultaneous repulsion and attraction opens the way to an encounter with the numinous. Brady is clear that she is not dealing with spiritual accounts of the sublime. She is constructing a secular philosophical environmental understanding of the sublime. At the same time, she does not discount the possibility of a spiritual dimension to the conversation.<sup>22</sup>

To overly simplify her definition, then, Brady frames the sublime as that which cannot be appropriated by humans. While for Kant the sublime was an object, for Brady the sublime is affective. Yet it is not purely experiential; it is always mediated through concrete materiality.

Yet within a postdigital context, in which we recognize the ways that even the most remote

wilderness is affected by human activity – climate change affects the ice, I can use Google Earth to view trees in remote jungles – is there really such a thing as something that cannot be appropriated by humanity? Can we actually encounter something that is sufficiently beyond human imprint that such otherness can be experienced? It is here that I turn to Tillich's description of sublimity, to see what resources can be found there.

### Tillich and Driving Towards the Sublime

In the 3<sup>rd</sup> volume of the Systematic Theology, Tillich brings up the concept of the sublime. The references are actually fairly sparse, and the definition not particularly detailed. He writes of the sublime under the category of the third function of life, self-transcendence. Tillich suggests that the way self-transcendence is manifested be termed "driving towards the sublime." He continues, "The words 'sublime,' 'sublimation,' 'sublimity' point to a 'going beyond limits' toward the great, the solemn, the high."<sup>23</sup> The drive toward the sublime, then, is a way of speaking of the excess or going beyond the self that is characteristic of life, and so all of his references to that constellation of words refers to this function.

To quickly give overview to his understanding of this function, the self-transcendence of life is set within the polarity of freedom and destiny, infinite and finite being. Rather than an empirically-observable dimension, self-transcendence speaks to the greatness of life qualitatively. "The great in the qualitative sense," he explains, "shows a power of being and meaning that makes it a representative of ultimate being and meaning and gives it the dignity of such representation."<sup>24</sup> In this way, self-transcendence speaks of a sense of subjectivity, with that subject having some degree of power or freedom. It is this freedom that allows for greatness or infinite being in the drive towards the sublime.

Tillich specifically argues one form of self-transcendence is self-awareness, in that to be aware of one's self is to be in a sense beyond one's self. This awareness allows one to recognize oneself as a subject, and as such to have greatness and dignity.

<sup>21</sup> Brady, 117.

<sup>22</sup> Brady, 191.

<sup>23</sup> STIII, 31.

<sup>24</sup> STIII, 88.



This introduces the polarity of pleasure and pain, as pleasure can be understood as recognizing oneself as a subject, while pain is the recognition of being objectified. In the former, the sublime center in self-awareness is recognized and celebrated, while in the latter this sublime is deprived of its greatness and dignity.<sup>25</sup>

Tillich views this subject-object split as a decisive moment for self-transcendence. He argues that even mystical religious impulses to overcome such dualism do not seek to annihilate the distinction, but rather to rise through and above the distinction to a position that simultaneously holds to and releases the distinction. Such a mystical impulse could be considered a continuation of the drive towards the sublime. This moves him from general claims of the sublime to a religious one: "Life is sublime in every realm dominated by the dimension of the spirit. The self-integration of life in the moral act and the self-creativity of life in the cultural act are sublime. Within them, life transcends itself in the vertical dimension, the direction of the ultimate."<sup>26</sup> In this sense, the sublime is that which self-transcendence drives towards through all of the dimensions of life.

Of course, in the ambiguity of life there is always an inverse. In the case of self-transcendence, the counter is profanization. Profanization is the denial of transcendence. Such denial reduces the "beyond" nature of life; it turns subjects into objects. The profanization of religion, more specifically, is identified by its "character of transforming [religion] into a finite object among finite objects."<sup>27</sup> It is the denial of spirit.

In Tillich's description of the principle of sublimity, then, the drive towards the sublime is a drive towards subjectivity and away from being objectified. It is interesting to note that Tillich does not include the sense of the sublime explicitly as an existential threat that opens the door to the numinous. It does, however, seem implicit that the sublime allows for the experienced phenomenon of the holy, which carries with it a sense of existential disruption.<sup>28</sup>

## Tillich and the Postdigital

How might Tillich's concept of the sublime as the subjectivity of self-transcendence help in thinking about the divine within a postdigital framework? Let me start with what I see to be the major potential stumbling block, in order to clear the way for what I find to be valuable.

The challenge that I see arising in coming to Tillich's thought through a postdigital lens is his definition of the technical act. He argued that what is produced by the technical act are objects transformed by humans into "things" that are merely tools, and as such removed from participation the spiritual dimension of life.<sup>29</sup> Technologies, in this sense, are external. More than that, they are objectified; that is, they have been profaned. The sublime has been driven from them in the process that creates technology. Trees are turned into desks, horses into horsepower, and so forth. Yet in engaging in this act of pseudo-creation – it seems to create something new but in fact only profanes what is – humanity also profanes itself in becoming dependent on the production and use of such objectified tools. Tool use is not a "natural" state of being, but it is also one that cannot be undone.

Postdigital thought would challenge the idea that the technological has no subjectivity. Life, world, and technology co-constitute one another, while also co-mediating one another. Technologies such as artificial intelligence demonstrate alternate views of subjectivity. Combining data and algorithms, the two basic components of artificial intelligence, brings forth something new with creative capacity in ways that remain elusive. Human subjectivity is shaped in ambiguous ways by its interaction with various forms of artificial intelligence. Yet this is not so much entirely a new phenomenon as it is a more dramatic demonstration of the ways that human subjectivity is forged in dynamic interaction with multiple other subjectivities – it both disrupts and continues existing theories. In this complex matrix of connectivity, human subjectivity is embodied and embedded in microplastics, 4G signals, algorithms, and industrial food production as much as it is

<sup>25</sup> STIII, 92.

<sup>26</sup> STIII, 96

<sup>27</sup> STIII, 98.

<sup>28</sup> See Tillich's discussion of the holy in STI, especially pages 216-217.

<sup>29</sup> STIII, 74.

constituted through bacteria, fungi, water, and minerals. Moreover, the political, social, and economic systems that mediate the interpretation and functioning of the dynamic interactions are also key factors in constituting a structural subjectivity. In this sense, I would argue for extending the ambiguity of self-transcendence into the technical. Digital technologies, like all technologies, have certainly demonstrated negative potential that can be categorized as profane, but there are also elements of distinct novelty to be found through the technical, especially when amplified by extreme capacities and connectivities of digital technologies. Such technologies are ambiguous, not fully profane.

We can then return to Tillich's sense of the sublime. I see several contributions that his sense of the drive towards the sublime can add to postdigital theology. First of all, his sense of self-transcendence in the multi-dimensional unity of life allows for thinking of subjectivity in a complex system of mutual interaction that does not limit the drive to the sublime to human activity. The principle of sublimity is widely active throughout material existence. In this sense, the sublime permeates the materialism giving it a dynamic movement towards the transcendent. Such dynamism can have a religious element in recognizing it as the dimension of Spirit. At the same time, the pull of the profane is also widely present, recognizing the ambiguity of reality and the movements away from the sublime. Such a sense gives urgency to the calls for a healing alternative vision. Tillich's sense of the sublime has a dynamism and moral capacity that Brady's theory does not address, as well as a more fully worked out capacity to attend to the religious realm.

Particularly helpful in this call to a healing alternative vision is the final mention of the sublime in Tillich's *Systematic Theology*. In the discussion of the symbol of the Kingdom of God, he describes it as a vision of the unambiguous life which "includes life in all realms, or that everything that is participates in the striving towards the inner aim of history: fulfilment or ultimate sublimation."<sup>30</sup> If that vision of ultimate sublimation includes the sublime within the technical, then it is a metaphor that can aid in the task of addressing the Anthropocene bio-

informational capitalist collision of the ecological and technological.

## Conclusion

To Brady's three venues of the sublime, I propose that the postdigital presents a fourth. It includes the mathematical sublime of the vastness of connections and data that become accessible through digital technologies. It also includes the dynamic sublime of the great power to make sense of those connections and that data through the use of algorithms to produce new perceptions. And it also includes the emotional response of a mixture of nausea and excitement classically associated with the sublime.

Tillich's sense of the sublime contributes to this postdigital sense of the sublime by recognizing the sublime through the non-human as well as the human. While he does not include the disorienting emotional component in his discussion of the sublime, I find it implicit in his writing that the sublime sets the conditions for being encountered by the holy, which does carry that disruptive weight. Thus, I see Tillich as being a helpful resource in considering a postdigital theology that gives space for an encounter with transcendence through the dynamic material.

## Antiracism As a Spiritual Practice: A Tillichian Framework

Nathaniel Holmes, Jr.

### Introduction

The deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor were the catalyst for widespread efforts aimed at criminal justice reform, racial equality, and vigorous efforts towards eradicating white supremacy. Concomitantly, there are no longer calls for a post-racialized society, or even a nonracist society. Instead, we are encouraged to engage in antiracist endeavors. Antiracism is not a new concept, but current events have highlighted the necessity for renewed emphasis on antiracist actions. Rachel Ricketts, Simran Jeet Singh, and Lisa Sharon Harper contend that antiracism is as much a spiritual and

<sup>30</sup> STIII, 350.

emotional endeavor as it is a commitment to activism. White supremacist ideology is embodied in institutions but it also resides in the hearts and minds of everyday people. They maintain that antiracism as a spiritual practice requires both listening and internalizing the experiences of those who suffer oppression and discrimination **combined** with activism to confront systemic racism. Those who espouse antiracism as a spiritual practice lack a robust theological grounding and language. I contend that Tillich's description of the demonic, critique of idolatrous-distorted faith, anxiety from nonbeing, and theological framing of *participation* provides viable heuristic theological language for expressing antiracism as a spiritual practice.

Ibram Kendi defines an antiracist as a person who supports antiracist policies through actions or expressing antiracist ideas.<sup>31</sup> It is not enough to simply identify racism or record instances of discrimination. Antiracism is active engagement in challenging racist ideologies and dismantling oppressive systems and structures through policies and practices aimed at equality and justice. Religious scholars such as Kaitlin Curtice, Lisa Sharon Harper, Wil Gafney, and Omid Safi have constructed theological mandates to challenge racism through various spiritual practices. Each articulates themes from texts and practices representative of their faith traditions. Each tries to show how antiracist activism is in keeping with the fundamental principles of their traditions and is in fact a spiritual mandate. And each identifies aspects of racism and offers specific actions we can employ to confront and surmount racism (e.g., interracial group discussions, policy implementations, pairing and sharing, and spiritual reflective exercises). Still, there is a need for more sophisticated theological analysis and language to support antiracism as a spiritual practice. A theological assessment of racism itself, exposing white supremacist mythology and ideologies as false ultimacy, and a theological vision of transformation and participation to support the practices of conversation, narrative sharing, culturally

appreciative practices, etc. all require robust theological grounding.

### Antiracism, Racism, The Demonic, and Tillich's Theology of Culture

J. Kameron Carter's *Race: A Theological Account* and Willie James Jennings's *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* are seminal texts that provide theological accounts of race and racism. Carter explores the various ideologies and conditions which contributed to our current racialized worldviews as well as how they shape our self-perceptions (individuals and groups). Jennings explicates how certain interpretations of Christianity and culture contributed to the invention of racial categories and continues to justify white supremacist imaginations. Still these works focus primarily on racism as *sin*. There is clear articulation of racism as sin and contrary to God's purposes for humanity, but no assessment of racism in terms of idolatry.<sup>32</sup> This absence is mirrored in antiracism literature in general. Applying Tillich's understanding of the demonic and idolatry can help address this aspect of racism. *Racism is a quintessential expression of the demonic*. In Tillichian terms, the *demonic* is a distortion or perversion of the good. Antiracism as a spiritual practice should examine "everything finite within the context of religion, culture, and politics, and ask whether it has become demonic and put itself into the place of the unconditional."<sup>33</sup>

Lisa Sharon Harper explores racism within the context of Genesis 1:26-27, particularly the connection between humanity's creation in the image of God and the granting of dominion by God.<sup>34</sup> Every human being has been granted the *gift* of dominion by God. Dominion means to steward, or to exercise agency and leadership. Racial and ethnic discrimination denies this gift to certain groups in society. Through poverty, oppression, or disenfranchisement, certain racial ethnic groups are deprived of their ability to exercise God-given agency. For Harper, this has spiritual as well as social implications. Diminishing or ignoring "the ability of

<sup>31</sup> Ibram Kendi, *How to Be An Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), 13.

<sup>32</sup> Willie James Jennings's *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 96-106.

<sup>33</sup> Martin Leiner, "Tillich on God" in Russel Re Manning, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 46.

<sup>34</sup> Lisa Sharon Harper, *The Very Good Gospel* (New York: Waterbrook, 2016), 137-158.

human beings to exercise dominion is to diminish or ignore the image of God in them."<sup>35</sup> It demeans the very goodness with which God has created all human beings. When Harper speaks of power, dominion, ethnicity and race, she is referring to culture and all the questions that accompany this complex concept. Culture involves establishing meaning and norms for society and groups. Who holds power? What roles do genders play? How should different ethnic groups relate?

Culture plays a prominent role for Tillich, particularly the "religious aspect of culture."<sup>36</sup> For Tillich, Culture has a religious depth which makes cultural acts *meaningful* acts. Human life is not solely the consequence of deterministic laws of the universe. Our lives are comprised of values and norms that are in large part created by us.<sup>37</sup> And our cultural norms, creative practices, and rituals are rooted in being-itself, the ground of meaning. This means that culture and human creativity are essentially good. However, as Duane Olson points out, Tillich did not blindly and naively overlook the destructive elements in culture. Although cultures are rooted in being-itself they are also "always in some sense estranged from that rootedness."<sup>38</sup> Estrangement causes the production of destructive behaviors such as war, repression, colonialism, and racism. It is estrangement that is the source of obstructing minorities and other groups from exercising dominion as Harper avers. Harper does not consider that interfering with human beings' ability to exercise God-given dominion and agency through racism, oppression, and disenfranchisement not only ignores the *imago dei*, but also identifies white supremacist ideology/mythology as the *unconditional*. It replaces true ultimacy with false ultimacies, and Anything that claims the character of the unconditional for itself becomes demonic.

The demonic participates in the power and holiness of the divine in a distorted way, and "it distorts self-transcendence by identifying a particular bearer of holiness with the holy itself."<sup>39</sup> Human beings are

bearers of the divine, and according to Harper, this includes diversity through the various ethnicities because "ethnicity is created by God."<sup>40</sup> All ethnic groups are bearers of the divine. Racism elevates a particular ethnic group to a place of supremacy, i.e., white supremacy self-elevates to divine status. The concept *demonic* is most appropriate because whiteness as an ethnicity is a creation of God, and thus a bearer of the holy like all other ethnicities. It is distorted when it claims supremacy and makes itself the holy. Racism is demonic because it seeks to destroy God's creative intentions and replace them with its own. It extolls a particular culture, history, ethnic group, and (perceived) way of life as *the* standard of all cultures and ethnicities and supports it with a religious mythology immersed in white supremacy.

### Anxiety and White Supremacist Identity

It is commonplace to identify white supremacy as an ideological justification of oppression (supported by pseudo-scientific racial characterizations) and a designation for the social power structures that allow whites to control power and resources and maintain dominance over other ethnic groups. However, there is a religious-theological side to white supremacy, which makes it intransigent. White supremacist identity is grounded in idolatrous faith. Analyzing supremacist identity through the lens of Tillich's understanding of anxiety in the *Courage to Be* helps expose white supremacist mythology as idolatrous.

There is a resistance on the part of those who maintain oppressive systems to either acknowledge past or present transgressions. Denial of the truths of history, erasing past atrocities of enslavement and settler colonialism, or current hate crimes is indicative of a kind of fear of the threat of nonexistence. This kind of resistance has been referred to as "white fragility," i.e., the psychological stress that produces passionate (and sometimes incensed) pushback against any attempts to address or dismantle racism and supremacy.<sup>41</sup> Rachael

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 138.

<sup>36</sup> Duane Olson, *The Depths of Life: Paul Tillich's Understanding of God* (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 2019), 100.

<sup>37</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol. III* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 84.

<sup>38</sup> Duane Olson, *The Depths of Life*, 102.

<sup>39</sup> S.T. Vol. III, 102.

<sup>40</sup> Lisa Sharon Harper, *The Very Good Gospel*, 138.

<sup>41</sup> See Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Beacon Press, 2018).

Ricketts prefers the designation “white wildness” to highlight the abusive actions that can result from a refusal to acknowledge and confront white supremacy and racism.<sup>42</sup> White fragility/wildness, though, is symptomatic of deeper spiritual-religious moorings, and Tillich’s notion of anxiety is very relevant here because of the fear that dismantling supremacist mythology will result in loss of identity and meaning.

For Tillich, awareness of our finitude leads to anxiety. In keeping with Heidegger, Tillich considers anxiety as directed towards nothingness, nonbeing.<sup>43</sup> He identifies three types of anxiety which mirror the three ways nonbeing threatens being. Nonbeing threatens a person’s ontic self-affirmation, spiritual self-affirmation, and moral self-affirmation.<sup>44</sup> Human awareness of these threats manifests as anxiety over fate and death, emptiness and loss of meaning, and guilt and condemnation. For spirituality based on racism, dismantling supremacist mythology produces anxiety of emptiness and loss. White supremacists view it as a threat to their very existence, a type of anxiety towards nonbeing. For supremacists, what it means to be “white” includes the subjugation of other racial and ethnic groups. It is fundamental to their identity, and they feel they have a “God-given” superiority which justifies such behavior. Therefore, calls for equality or activism seeking to implement antiracist policies are viewed not only as an attack on systemic power structures, but also on what they perceive to be constitutive elements of their identity. We may cry out for justice by putting an end to racism, but the white supremacist hears only a call for his/her *nonexistence*.

This is so because supremacist mythology not only fulfills social and historical needs but spiritual needs as well. Racist-Supremacist mythologies espouse its own spiritual principles and values, and demands allegiance. These myths become ultimate concern for those who ascribe to them. Participation in them (i.e., embracing them as essential for spiritual

identity) provides spiritual affirmation. Robert P. Jones provides crucial insight how white American (Protestant) Christianity protects and justifies white supremacy. He says,

[W]hite supremacy, as it has developed historically in the United States, is typically tied to a concept of the superiority of [white] Protestant Christian culture, motivating attacks not just on African Americans and immigrants but also on Jews Muslims, Sikhs, and other non-Christian religious minorities.”<sup>45</sup> [Furthermore] “While white Christian theology evolved in response to the changing environment, it responded primarily by shifting from more overt to more subtle expressions of white supremacy rather than a wholesale examination of its racist roots. A close examination of key theological doctrines such as the Christian worldview of slaveholders, sin, and salvation, the centrality of a personal relationship with Jesus, and the use of the Bible reveals how each was tailored to resist black [and all non-whites] equality and protect white superiority, and how this legacy dramatically limits the moral and religious vision of white Christians today.”<sup>46</sup>

Theological antiracist counter-narratives to supremacist mythologies expose these mythologies for what they are, i.e., false ultimacy, the finite claiming infinite status. Exposing supremacist myths evokes anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness because there is a loss of a perceived “ultimate concern, of a meaning that gives meaning to all meanings.”<sup>47</sup> When antiracism is a functional reality, white supremacist myths can no longer serve as the basis of spirituality. It is extremely important to note, however, that this sense of anxiety of meaninglessness and emptiness is *misappropriated*. It is the result of idolatrous faith because the finite falsely claims ultimacy. Moreover, it is a kind of idolatry which resulted from ideologies that are

<sup>42</sup> Rachel Ricketts, *Do Better: Spiritual Activism for Fighting and Healing from White Supremacy* (New York: Atria Books, 2021), 336-337, 338.

<sup>43</sup> J. Heywood Thomas, *Paul Tillich: An Appraisal* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 116.

<sup>44</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (Yale University Press, 1952), 41.

<sup>45</sup> Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2020), 80.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 81.

<sup>47</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 47.

contrary to love, justice, and the true ground of being. For Tillich, to assert God's relation to love, power, and justice is tantamount to saying that God is being itself. For "being itself...implies love, power, and justice."<sup>48</sup> Thus, supremacist spirituality was not *authentic* spirituality to begin with because it cannot represent true ultimacy.

The use of anxiety in this sense is in keeping with Tillich's assessment of idolatrous faith, and the resulting existential crisis. In the *Dynamics of Faith*, Tillich characterizes idolatrous faith as a centered act of faith that "leads to a loss of the center and to a disruption of the personality."<sup>49</sup> Faith is the state of being grasped by ultimate concern, and there is a crucial distinction between true and false ultimacy. Tillich uses nationalism as an example of a false ultimacy (especially the horrors of Nazism he witnessed). White supremacist ideologies and mythology are akin to the false ultimacy of nationalism. Eventually one is disillusioned and disappointed because one realizes that the nation (or the racial group) cannot produce the ultimacy it claimed. A person is "disappointed radically and totally" because they possessed idolatrous faith and an "inescapable consequence of idolatrous faith is 'existential disappointment.'"<sup>50</sup>

Antiracism as a spiritual endeavor must include offering an alternative spiritual as well as a socio-political vision. We must, as Tillich admonishes, "discover the false gods in the individual soul [as well as] in society."<sup>51</sup> Antiracist spirituality is an indictment against the gods which are not God, the distorted spirituality of white supremacy. Nonetheless it is not enough to dismantle idolatrous mythology, but also articulate a spiritual pathway from white supremacist identity to genuine being in fellowship through *participation*.

### **Tillich, Participation, Evil, Sin, and Racism**

Participation is an essential theological concept for antiracism's spiritual practices of intersectionality, transformative truth-telling, conversation, and reconciliation. It is through participation that we are

able to see the other as a person, and also by which we become fully persons ourselves.

Tillich says,

the abstract notion of 'acknowledging the other one as a person' becomes concrete only in the notion of participating in the other one (which follows from the ontological polarity of individualization and participation). Without participation one would not know what 'other self' means; no empathy discerning the difference between a thing and a person would be possible. Even the word 'thou' in the description of the ego-thou encounter could not be used, because it implies the participation that is present whenever one addresses somebody as a person. So, one must ask, What kind of participation is it in which the moral self is constituted and which has unconditional validity? It certainly cannot be a participation in the particular characteristics of another self with one's own particular characteristics. This would be the more or less successful convergence of two particularities which could lead to sympathy or antipathy, to friendship or hostility; this is a matter of chance, which does not constitute a moral imperative. The moral imperative demands that one self participate in the center of the other self and consequently accept his particularities even if there is no convergence between the two individuals as individuals. This acceptance of the other self by participating in his personal center is the core of love in the sense of *agape*.<sup>52</sup>

Genuine participation in the other and recognition of authentic ultimacy of God as Love through the other is the only sufficient replacement for supremacist mythology. This replacement and healing occurs in practices of conversation, intersectionality, and reconciliation.

Moreover, participation also legitimizes antiracism's attempts to confront racism and supremacy. Tillich is

<sup>48</sup> Paul Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice* (Oxford University Press, 1954), 109.

<sup>49</sup> Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (Perennial Classics, 1957, 2001), 14.

<sup>50</sup> Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 13.

<sup>51</sup> Paul Tillich, *Shaking the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), 131. My Emphasis.

<sup>52</sup> *S.T. Vol. III*, 45.

clear that no individual exists without participation in a community of other “fully developed selves.”<sup>53</sup> One of the most significant aspects of this principle is the necessity of *confrontation* and *argumentation*. Without a genuine encounter of another self, a person is bound to attempt to make themselves absolute. The same can be said of different racial and ethnic groups. Without the genuine encounter of one group with another (recognizing each other’s right to existence and agency), one group will be tempted to make themselves absolute. In destroying the agency of others, persons who ascribe to white supremacy also destroy themselves. Antiracist resistance is actually a pathway to their salvation and healing. As Tillich says, “in the resistance of the other person, the person is born.”<sup>54</sup> Jettisoning white supremacist mythology and racism means a new identity is needed, via a rebirth. This rebirth can only occur through participation. The racist has to be reborn through the antiracist! They must be reborn through those whom they have oppressed, i.e., through participation.

## New Publications from NAPTS Members

*The Ethics of Paul Tillich*, Mercer University Press. September 2021.

**Ron Stone**

*The Nazi Religion and The Rise of the French Christian Resistance*, Rowman and Littlefield. *Forthcoming*

**Kathleen Burton**

“Confronting the Ideology Behind the Post=Truth Phenomenon: Outlining a Public Theology of Ultimate Concern.” *International Journal of Public Theology* 15 (2021)

**Ben Siu-pun Ho**

*Disability’s Challenge to Theology: Genes, Eugenics, and the Metaphysics of Modern Medicine*, Notre Dame Press, August 2022.

**Devan Stahl**

## Membership News and Dues

As many of you know, our current website is still in the process of being updated (time has not been our friend). While we hope at some point to be able to do electronic dues, for the time being we may still need to do checks. More information on that will be coming through the Google listserv from the Society treasurer, Lawrence Whitney. The annual meeting this year will include a banquet and speaker. While in the past the cost of the banquet has been \$50, with rising food costs we do not know at this time what the final cost will be. More information on that will come from the current president, Bin Song, and president elect, Ilona Nord, through the listserv.

<sup>53</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol. I* (University of Chicago Press, 1951), 176.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* 177.