

André Daughtry Presentation on “Tillich, Judson Church, and the Avant-Garde”

American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature convention
North American Paul Tillich Society
November 17, 2018

Tillich: Issues in Theology, Religion, and Culture Unit

Theme: *Tillich and the Arts*

Russell Re Manning, Bath Spa University, Presiding

- Saturday, 5:30 PM–7:00 PM
Room: *Convention Center—Mile High 2C (Lower Level)*

Tillich believed the arts create symbols for a level of reality, which cannot be reached any other way. In Tillich’s theology of culture, art occupies an important position as a cultural formation that can impart unconditional meaning. This panel session will host scholars using the work of Tillich or correlational theology to understand the arts in contemporary culture.

- Duane Olson, McKendree University
A Theonomous Gospel: John Adams’ “The Gospel According to the Other Mary”
- Clive Marsh, University of Leicester
The “Gehalt” of Culture Re-Visited: Further Explorations in Correctives to Tillich’s Reservations about Popular Culture
- André Daughtry, Union Theological Seminary
Tillich, Judson Church, and the Avant-Garde

For its current 2018 exhibition season, The Museum of Modern Art in New York City mounted a show titled *Judson Dance Theater: The Work is Never Done* which is a gallery exhibition and performance retrospective highlighting the experimentation of a group of dancers and visual artists who performed in the 1960's inside the Judson Memorial Church situated in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of Manhattan. The exhibition which opened on September 13th and is currently on view at MOMA until Feb 3rd, 2019, highlights the activities of a collective of new york avant-garde artists who turned a protestant Baptist church into a sanctuary for the arts. On October 13th, Judson Church and MOMA co-organized an all day event that was held inside the church that was intended to be a celebration of Judson's history and its continued relationship to experimental art and social justice. I co-curated the performances for that day and I also put together and moderated a panel discussion that was titled "The Mutual influence of Art and Religion".

The panel included author Kay Larson, who writes extensively about the arts and Buddhism, Rev. Micah Bucey, who is currently one of the pastors of Judson Church and Dr. John Thataminal, associate professor of Theology and World Religions at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York.

My intention for the panel was to bring to the MOMA audience the mostly unknown connections between modern art and religious thought that influenced the clergy of Judson church to incorporate the arts into the ministries of the congregation as well as the spiritual influences on the artists themselves. Since the event was taking place in a New York landmarked church, I felt compelled to re-

introduce theology as a generative foundation to contemporary arts practices. I decided to invite Dr. Thataminal in order to open the panel presentation with an introduction to the modern theologian in the west who wrote the most about the mutual influence of modern culture, theology and church. That theologian is no other than Paul Tillich. Tillich's thoughts of the ultimate concern, art, the latent church and spiritual communities are very fecund ideas that had a huge impact on the congregation and clergy of Judson church. Tillich's writings directly informed Judson's early relationships to the burgeoning artistic communities surrounding the church and it is Tillich's views on the institution of Church and Culture that served as the foundation for a veritable revolution in the arts. But before we get into how Tillich's thoughts on the dialectics of modern culture and religious institutions affected the thinking of Judson's clergy and congregation, let's take a brief look at Judson's very unique history.

In 1890, ground was broken for a new church on the Southside of Washington Square Park in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City. It was the vision of a young minister by the name of Edward Judson, a Baptist minister and the son of Adoniram Judson, the first well-known protestant missionary to Asia. Edward Judson had a vision that slightly differed from the missionary work of his father in that the missionary's impulse to ministry could be turned towards the domestic communities of immigrants in America. Judson wanted to erect a church that was to be of service to those particular communities which went beyond preaching and praying. Edward's theology and philosophy was that church should essentially be a community center that serves the community. His ideas would later

be written in the form of a primer called *The Institutional Church*. With the help of seed money from John D. Rockefeller himself, Judson would build a structure to help towards the realization of a church that was intended to serve the people. None other than Stanford White, the famous American architect who also designed the popular arch at Washington Square Park, executed the building's design. Artist John Lafarge, who was the inventor of the innovative opalescent glass process that became the reigning decorative window style during the American gilded age, completed the stained glass windows. The Romanesque style of the building itself is an intentional testament to the envisioned utilitarian mission of the church. Edward wanted to make the building familiar to the catholic Italian immigrants who inhabited lower Manhattan at the time in order for them to come and receive services and not feel unwelcomed by an overtly protestant looking structure. For Judson's first 60 years, its ministries served the community with services that ranged from a health clinic that maintained the only clean public water fountain accessible to the immigrant poor families, summer camps for children, English language courses, and American cooking and sewing classes, just to name a few services amongst a long list of programs provided.

But by the 1950's the demographics of the community which became known colloquially as "the village", were starting to shift quite significantly. The village was being repopulated by a new group of people who were looking to settle a new land that would allow them a new way of life, but as opposed to the previous inhabitants who traveled to the village from overseas to find food and work, these new pioneers were looking for a place where they could lead a new form of sustenance by way of

the arts. The clergy of Judson saw the shift in its community and responded to its needs as it had always done.

In 1955 the Rev. Robert Spike who was the senior pastor of Judson Memorial Church at that time hired a young seminary student by the name of Bernard “Bud” Scott from Union Theological Seminary in Morningside Heights to become head of Judson’s artist outreach program. Bud Scott’s new position was created with the intention of expanding Judson’s ongoing mission of being an institution that was to serve the needs of the community. Rev. Spike saw that the mission of the church needed to evolve to meet the needs of the new community of artists who were starting to call the village their home.

After Rev. Spike’s departure from Judson Church, in order to pursue a more national role in the civil rights movement, Bud Scott, who eventually became an associate Minister at Judson, by that time had already spent some years meeting with artists in the various pubs and cafes when the new young visionary minister, the Rev. Howard Moody, took on the role of senior pastor at Judson. Rev. Moody quickly encouraged Scott to establish the Judson Gallery with the artist Claes Oldenburg as co-director in 1958 in the basement of the building that was known as Judson House, an adjacent building that the church owned and used for student and staff housing. Judson Gallery was where famous artists like Claes Oldenburg, Allan Kaprow and many other celebrated artists would have some of their first shows in New York. After Bud Scott’s departure in 1960, Howard Moody would eventually hire another Union Seminary student to work with the arts named Al Carmines.

Associate Minister Carmines' interest in art was more related to musical theater and he would eventually become leader of the Judson Poets Theater, which staged regular performances in the choir loft, making Judson Church one of the three original homes of off-off Broadway. Judson, having quickly become the site of artistic experimentation and progressive theology would eventually allow a group of experimental dancers to use its spaces as a sanctuary to cultivate their multi-vocal practices in order to radicalize traditional forms of dance. These dance/performance artists would come to call themselves the Judson Dance Theater, which also makes Judson the original home of post-modern dance. Post-modern dance and Judson are studied in performance departments in art schools around the world and a major exhibition at an institution like MOMA is a testament to the power of Judson's influence on the world of contemporary arts.

Preceding these seminal years of radical experimentation with art in shared proximity to a sacred space, there were a few Christian theologians— some of whom taught at some point at Union Seminary—who were redefining what was religious tradition in relationship to society in very radical ways. But it is Tillich who attempted to provide a systematic theology that specifically concentrated on culture and the arts.

Tillich's ideas had a profound influence on all the post World War II Judson Ministers. Rev. Al Carmines had a personal connection to the older German thinker of culture who was at the time of their meeting, the Professor of Theology and Culture at Union Seminary. Carmines had met the influential theologian while he was still an undergraduate at Swarthmore College. Tillich encouraged Al Carmines

to continue his studies at a seminary after Swarthmore, because of his deep inquiries around faith and culture. Carmines would eventually earn a Bachelor degree in Divinity and a Master in Sacred Theology at Union Seminary with the intention of becoming one of Tillich's PhD students.

Judson Church's congregation also embraced Tillich's innovative ideas around theology and modern culture which ultimately impressed a certain self-imposed responsibility on the part of the congregation to show up for not only Sunday morning church services, but for all the experimental visual and performance art works that were taking place inside the building on a weekly basis.

Most of us present are familiar with Tillich's ideas of a necessary interpenetration of religion and art, and it is Judson's congregation that became acquainted with them in order to implement those ideas in the church. The decades of examples of cross pollination between congregational life and the witnessing of artistic exploration in the church range from the anecdotal, like when the artist Carolee Schneemann's 1964 performance work "Meat Joy" performed in Judson's sanctuary consisted of raw fish pressed between semi-nude bodies that left a stench so palpable and lingering, that the following Sunday service Rev. Howard Moody was moved to give a sermon on the new testament story of the loaves and the fishes. The pragmatic, which was the permanent removal of the wooden pews in order to make the sanctuary more spatially fluid for performances and eventually worship service itself, and finally, to the theological, where the weekly artistic and political activities of the church would eventually lead to the revision of all liturgical practices during Sunday Morning worship services. The visible contrast between

artistic practices and worship services lead to the creation of the 1964 Worship Council which was formed to respond to the dissonance that many felt made church service feel out of step with the times.

It is important to note that a structure like Judson's, that was funded by one of the most famous American capitalists, would continue to fulfill its original founder's vision of the "institutional church", by constantly evolving by way of adopting Tillich's dialectical critique of the traditional church that denies the secular world. A critique that can be understood to coincide with Tillich's noticeable Marxist leanings, which informed his idea of a latent church that adopts a praxis of dialectical interactions between church and society.

In his book, *The socialist Emigré*, Bernard Donnelly speaks to what he convincingly claims is Tillich's undeniable influence from Marxism's dialectical materialism as a necessary tool when theorizing the role of church in modern society. Donnelly states that, "Tillich reconstructs the theory of church from the elements of Catholic Substance and Protestant Principle in forming an outlook that sees the church in polar and dialectical tension with other social groupings and with society itself. The religious concerns are not solely the preserve of the churches to the exclusion of other groups and organizations. The awareness that Tillich gives is that secularism is not irreligious but rather the "expression of the latent religion in nonreligious forms." The dialectical engagement of the church helps to identify and thrust forward the religious elements found in secular society. In that way the church itself can be reminded of its own role and how historically it has fallen short in that regard. So the dialectic is both internal and external; the dialectic between

Protestantism and Catholicism the church and secular society. This is how Tillich's understanding is neither Protestant nor Catholic, but markedly unique and singular. How Tillich substantiates and justifies this position is the measure by which he drew parallels from the Marxist concept of the Proletariat." (Donnelly, pg. 87)

Judson church expresses this unique perspective by not only holding worship services for its mostly white congregation who worship inside and administer the space, but it also shares and rents space to other progressive congregations which includes the mostly LGBTQ congregation of color called *Restoration Temple Ministries*, a progressive Korean church named *The Least of These*, and a progressive Jewish community which call themselves *Lab Shul*. This can be viewed as an example of the internal dialectic. The myriad activists, artists and activists/artists associations who use the church for secular social justice and experimental artistic practices can be considered to fall under the external dialectics of church and secular society. This markedly unique and singular perspective is what has been called "The Judson Model".

At Judson, our service expresses a belief in the total dissolution of the bifurcation between the sacred and the profane. This dissolution is clearly expressed in Judson's main service where for example, an ancient testimony is given during the liturgy, like the 23rd Psalms, followed immediately by a modern testimony, like the Broadway tune *Hot Patootie---Bless my Soul*, from the Rocky Horror Picture Show.

While speaking of a church and its community as a part of a dialectical process in Tillich's theology, Donnelly points us to Tillich's other borrowings from

Marx such as the concept of the proletariat, which was previously mentioned. The proletariat is one of those concepts that evolved over the years for Tillich especially after moving to the United States, which was quickly becoming a post-industrial society. The proletariat –according to Marxism– is the class that suffers the most from economic alienation, but in a religious socialism that Tillich proposed, the latent church could be a viable site for an alienated and estranged community to find resources for the creation of a new society as long as it was formed within a dialectical process between church and contemporary culture. After his move to the US, Tillich’s adaptation to an American material, economic and political reality pulls even more from his existentialist foundations when using ideas like estrangement that give more religious depth to the Marxist alienation that tends to stay in the materialist, economic spheres.

So when one thinks of the specific role of the bohemian artists making work at Judson who do not neatly fall under the classical Marxist category of the proletariat, one witnesses that their work speaks to the estrangement and alienation of many Americans in the 1950’s and 60’s. Donnelly states that Tillich believed that social organization would come from, “sections of the intelligentsia, of the churches, and of the younger generation”. (Donnelly, pg. 85) It’s obvious that artists are useful in the fueling of a social imagination. When speaking about a community that deals with the ultimate concern, Tillich believed that the community did not need to be delimited by the doctrines of any religion. Tillich believed that, “The Spiritual Community can be seen in “nonchurch” and secular forms.” (Donnelly, pg. 96)

I personally see the artists who are making art works that express ultimate concerns to be a part of a spiritual community and in the case of Judson it happens to take place in a church while at the same time it remains to be considered secular and “nonchurch”. That is why Judson sees every community that shares its space as just another one of its many congregations. An example of a secular expression of ultimate concern inside a church can be seen in this transcript of an interview with the earlier mentioned artist Carolee Schneeman.

Performed in 1964, *Meat Joy* involved barely clothed performers, raw fish, sausages and paint in Judson’s Sanctuary. Schneemann said, “I thought of *Meat Joy* as an erotic ritual for my starved culture, with the body extended into raw fish and chickens and sausages and layers of paper and plastic and paint. I wanted things to really break at the edges and to merge and be wet where they had been dry and on top of each other where that had been separated. The culture was starved in terms of sensuousness because sensuality was always confused with pornography. The old patriarchal morality of proper behavior and improper behavior had no threshold for the pleasures physical contact that were not explicitly about sex but related to something more ancient—the worship of nature, worship of the body, a pleasure in sensuousness. It was performed in the center of the church and of course, the incredible aroma never left of the raw mackerel the old chickens and the old sausages. Rev. Howard Moody accepted that and did his sermons in regard to the smells, sermons on the loaves and the fishes. It was wonderful.” (MOMA, audio transcript #289)

Now to use only one anecdote, which in this case is Carollee Shneemans's unorthodox work and Rev. Moody's innovative response by means of homiletics, as an example to sum up the seminal decades of interaction between radical artistic performance and equally radical congregational life at Judson, is likened to taking the new testament verse Jesus Wept found in the gospel of John to summarize Jesus' entire character. But I wanted to give a clear example of Tillich's concept of autonomy performing itself inside the walls of a building erected on the foundations of heteronomous religion so that the theonomous could be powerfully expressed.

Tillich's concentration on developing a theology for American culture in which he considers the role of the arts and the church is truly the foundation to the spiritual community of Judson, which is indeed known in the art world as a sanctuary for the secular arts today. Tillich's profound ideas—which were partially realized by Judson's clergy—did indeed provide a revolution in the world of contemporary arts and I would want to believe that that was a lot of Tillich's intentions during his time in the United States. Tillich's ideas that he developed in part from Marxism were in direct response to the Germany that born and raised him, but once he found himself in his new home here in the States, there was inevitably a fundamental shift in his focus.

Donnelly mentions that Tillich once said to Max Horkheimer, “I once believed that with religious socialism I could lead a fundamental change in Christian theology. But since then my hopes are confined to giving the American people a well-worked out theology which they have never had.” (Donnelley, pg. 20)

I personally enjoy discovering Tillich's relationships to thinkers like Horkheimer. It reminds me of my own art school background which was saturated with assigned readings from the writings of most of the members of the German Institute of Social Research better known as the Frankfurt school who were acquainted with Tillich like Horkheimer was. The influence of the Frankfurt school on questions of aesthetics, culture and ideology had a real effect on Tillich's theology.

So, I have become aware of some lingering contention amongst many Tillicheans—hopefully none of the ones present here in this room today—of an accusation of a form of softening of Tillich's socialist critique and therefore overall diminishing of intellectual output of radical political thought. That for me is a bit hard to swallow, because I have a job that allows a church and contemporary art to live and thrive well into the 21st century not only in Judson but also in other “aspiring latent churches” of the arts around the world.

The legacy of providing space and pledging support to artists in the community from inside a Church was invaluable for the nurturing of a new movement in performance, theater and visual arts. It was a revolution back then as it continues to be now. And it is still Tillich's words that inspire us to provide that service as an aspiring latent, institutional church in the very present. To leave you with word's from Tillich himself as to the role of the arts in society, I will share with you an Address that he delivered in 1964 at the opening of the Museum of Modern Arts' new galleries and Sculpture Garden. Tillich was a huge supporter of MOMA and found the art on its walls to be always an uplifting experience while dealing

with the feelings of difficult adjustment to a new country, language and culture that must have felt like a huge rupture in the beginning of his middle aged years. So it was with huge honor and with much gratitude when he addressed the MOMA audience.

Tillich said, “ My expression of gratitude is certainly personal, but it is meant to express the feeling of all those who, like myself, are neither artists nor art-experts, but who love the visual arts and have experienced, at least in some ecstatic moments, the opening and revealing power that art can have. And finally, I want to offer thanks in the name of the many millions who have visited this place and had at least a glimpse beneath the surface of their ordinary lives.

For the arts do both, they open up a dimension of reality, which is otherwise hidden, and they open up our own being for receiving this reality. Only the arts can do this: science, philosophy, moral action and religious devotion cannot. The artist brings to our senses and, through them to our whole being, something of the depth of our world and of ourselves, something of the mystery of being. When we are grasped by a work of art, things appear to us, which were unknown before, possibilities of being, unthought-of powers, hidden in the depth of life which take hold of us. They reach us through the language of art, a language different from that of our daily life, a language of symbols, however realistic the artistic style may be. This is true of all arts, and in particular way of the arts of the eye, in the service of which this building has been renewed.

If the works of art open up and reveal what was closed and hidden, a breakthrough must occur in every artistic encounter with reality, a break through

the familiar surface of our world and our own self. Only if the things as they are ordinarily seen and heard and touched and felt are left behind, can art reveal something out of another dimension of the universe. Without breaking our natural adherence to the familiar, the power of art cannot grasp us. Therefore new ways of disclosing the world have always aroused the resistance of those who wanted to stay securely with the familiar.” (Museum of Modern Art Address)

So is Tillich’s later work to develop a “theology for Americans that they have never had” to be considered a revolutionary endeavor? Is his shifting from a socialist influenced speculative philosophy to a systematic theology of culture and art a version of a break from the familiar in order to, “open up and reveal what was closed and hidden in American culture itself”, as Tillich had said? If that is indeed the case, then the possible, probable, most likely softening of his political edge gave way to a caressing and teasing out of a whole other set of possibilities for the art world by way of a congregation who were seeing the vital role of modern art as he did. There is nothing impotent about a soft revolution. In fact coca cola and Rock ‘n roll was as much of a game changer in world politics after World War 2 as Facebook, twitter and instagram culture affect real elections today.

I thank Tillich for what he gave in the form of ideas as a light to a church community who were attempting to become a spiritual community by way of the avant-garde that started a revolution that the world is still responding to today.

Thank you.

Bibliography

Donnelly, Brian, *The Socialist Emigré: Marxism and the Later Tillich*. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2003

Address by Dr. Paul Tillich, *On the occasion of the opening of the new galleries and Sculpture Garden of the Museum of Modern Art*. May 25, 1964

Audio Transcript #289 with Carolee Schneemann and Thomas Lax
<https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/53/783>