

AMBIGUITY IN OUR TECHNICAL SOCIETY

by J. Mark Thomas

Abstract. The spiritual situation at the turn of the millennium can be interpreted through Paul Tillich's appropriation of modernity, by analysis of the determinative structures and decisive trends of our age. The methods and organization of industry determine modern society. Spiritually, this situation results in the proliferation of means without ends, the objectification of natural structures, and the reduction of persons to things. Extrapolating from Tillich's analysis, the spiritual situation at the turn of the millennium can be understood as a quasi-religious struggle between the movements of liberal individualism and multiculturalism, both of which lose the sense of ambiguity. The communitarian movement and related interpretations remain the minority voice offering a mediating position.

Keywords: ambiguities; competition; individualism; industry; liberalism; moral; spiritual situation; technical society; Paul Tillich.

A Texas rancher on vacation in Wisconsin stops at a farm to ask directions. "Have you lived here all your life?" the rancher asks.

"Not yet," the farmer answers.

The same must be said for the twentieth century. We have not yet lived here all our lives. We have exhausted the themes neither of modernity nor postmodernity. We have hardly agreed upon the questions, much less the answers, concerning individualism and communalism, technical progress and moral digression, equality and excellence, pluralism and unity.

What, then, is the spiritual situation at the turn of the millennium? Is there anything more than the calendar that marks this moment as different in meaning and being from that which has come before? And what would this new situation demand of us?

J. Mark Thomas is an instructor of Sociology and department head of the Social Sciences Department at Madison Area Technical College, 211 North Carroll Street, Madison, WI 53703. This paper was presented at the conference, "The Religious Situation at the Dawn of the New Millennium," sponsored by the North American Paul Tillich Society at New Harmony, Indiana, 19 June 1999.

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Paul Tillich's 1954 lecture sponsored by the Wesley Foundation at the University of Mississippi was titled "The Spiritual Situation in Our Technical Society" (Tillich 1954). It seems to exist now only in the form of handwritten notes. What did Tillich identify as the marks of the situation then, and would his analysis hold today?

The spiritual situation is not static, said Tillich. Structures change, as do the meanings attached to them. Today one might note the fall of the Berlin wall, the rise of Serbian nationalism, or Rwandan massacres. Maps change. But, as important as these elements of flux might be, they were not themselves the characteristics of the situation that Tillich found fundamental. The task of interpretation was not to catalogue change in the particulars but to "describe determining structures and decisive trends." The great analysts of our time who had used this risky method overlooked many things, Tillich confessed, "but they hit essential structures and influenced spiritual and political realities" (Tillich 1954, 2).

What makes a structure determinative or a trend decisive Tillich does not discuss. Perhaps these concepts refer to the stuff of history as he described it in other contexts. If so, they would not designate the infinite variety of things that people do or think in an age but the elements of social structure and cultural interpretation that are historically causative rather than derivative.

So, what did Tillich believe to be the spiritual situation in our technical society? His answer is implicit in the title of his lecture: the determining structures and decisive trends of our time are those of an "industrially determined society." This is not to say that our civilization is produced by industry as such, he cautioned. The presence of the factories cannot make us what we are. *Homo faber* (human being as maker) is resident in all societies and in every time. It is our destiny, rather, to be determined by the "methods and organization of industry." We live in a society ordered for the production of means, a "world of tools above the given world" (Tillich 1954, 3).

The sociological implications of this are not further drawn in Tillich's lecture notes, but they can be extrapolated. What does it mean for a society to be determined by the methods and organization of industry? It means that all institutions, including religion no less than economics, are bent to the service of the creation of means. They are organized and measured by economic or technical efficiency, which is to say by their instrumental capacity. Inefficient or irrational or otherwise undesirable elements are purged, such as the feeling for a particular place or the nepotistic attachment to friends and family. Family feeling, for instance, resists the rational labor market's demand that people move from their point of origin to fill an occupational niche.

The dominance of this trend remains apparent in economic life; for instance, the weak attachment the market allows people to have to their

birthplace scatters succeeding generations into a national and international labor pool. But the “methods and organization of industry” Tillich identifies may be manifest just as well in the work of theologians, who, accepting the social construction of reality, work to design gods to achieve the rational or moral goals they have in mind.

In another context, Tillich identified this trend as the result of the “bourgeois principle,” the “radical dissolution of all conditions, bonds, and forms related to the origin into elements that are to be rationally mastered, and the rational assemblage of these elements into structures serving the aims of thought and action” (Tillich 1977, 47–48). He spells out the implications of the bourgeois principle in a number of directions. The soil, for instance, becomes “a means for the production of goods.” The sense of belonging to a particular place is lost. If anything, this trend has been exacerbated since Tillich’s time as agribusiness replaces agriculture and as globalization standardizes production and distribution. When I was lecturing at McGill University in Montreal a few years ago, I looked in vain through the Hudson’s Bay Company for Canadian products to bring home to my family. Just as in the United States, the commodities I found were produced worldwide and collected on the shelves for mass marketing.

Advances in transportation reduce the particularity and portentousness of place, Tillich says. Today one finds Michael Jackson posters on the walls of huts in the most remote regions of Africa. The power and grandeur of wild nature recedes as one soars above the Amazon. The “potency of animal existence disappears before the power of rational efficiency,” Tillich explains. The Internet makes China as close in many ways as Akron, Ohio, and arguably makes China more and more *like* Akron, Ohio. “Traditions,” says Tillich, “cannot withstand the demands for a rational structuring of existence” (Tillich 1977, 32–34).

So this was the situation as Tillich understood it in 1954: our society is determined by the organization and methods of industry, making people, natural structures, groups, and ideas into means to some unspecified ends.

What, then, is the “spiritual problem” arising from this situation? Tillich lists three answers to this question. First is the problem brought about by the “disproportion between means and ends.” It is a “perversion,” says Tillich, to make means into ends. Such ends as the “conquest of nature, economic abundance,” or the “well-being of the masses” are ultimately made into means again. The “question of the ultimate end disappears from the center of consciousness,” he says, “even if traditional religious or philosophical answers are given. They are not a matter of ultimate concern” (Tillich 1954, 4–5).

The perversion of means and ends also both produces and covers emptiness, Tillich charges. Emptiness is not hidden for long, however, in that existentialist literature addresses “the anxiety of meaninglessness as an expression of it.”

The second problem identified by Tillich is that of the “transformation of reality into objects.” Of the two kinds of encounter with reality, one seeks to unite and one to control. It is the latter that is decisive in the industrial domination of the world. Serving this purpose is the “cognitive transformation of things into their elements, in order to compose them for purposes.” The result of this transformation is to remove “the inner quality from things, their depth and independent meaning. Knowing becomes unexistential.” Truth becomes “scientific, manageable truth.” The “realms which reveal the inner quality of things (artistic, ethical, religious) [are] surrendered to emotion.” In this circumstance, “doubt about any meaning in reality increases the experience of emptiness.” In reaction, the world is either pressed to provide adequate pleasure to cover this emptiness or is cynically rejected (Tillich 1954, 6). Since Tillich’s time, the sheer number and quality of gadgets that have been produced for diversion has grown exponentially. Our children, for instance, can lose themselves indefinitely in more and more sophisticated computer games. And television now boasts hundreds of channels and choices, but without greater demands for participation and decision, as Robert Bellah has observed: “television . . . diverts but on the whole does not challenge. . . . It is often hard for us to see the flood of events as anything more than transient images on the screen, mildly exhilarating or vaguely disturbing but hardly calling for responsible action or even judgment” (Bellah et al. 1992, 49, 149).

Even more telling may be the revolution in biotechnology that has resulted in the cloning of desirable animals and the patenting of designer genes. Objectification seems complete in this trend.

The third spiritual problem arising from the situation of our technical society is the “transformation of the person into a thing.” Here Tillich notes two seemingly contradictory trends in industrial society: one toward competition and one toward conformity. Competition has changed from its more person-determined form in the period of early economic liberalism, he hints. “Now,” he says, “it is a matter of the expert.” Competition is functionally determined, he remarks, bringing about anxiety, for instance, for the employee. Robert Jackall’s more recent sociological study of moral decision making in bureaucratic organizations leads us to believe that the intensity of conformity and competition in bureaucracies has, if anything, increased since Tillich’s time. Universities no less than businesses have replaced the Protestant ethic with a more Machiavellian bureaucratic ethic (Jackall 1988).

Conformity is manifest in the demand to adapt “to the patterns of production and consumption,” writes Tillich. Both mass communication and the desire to be accepted are symptoms of this drive to conformity (Tillich 1954, 7). With the recent Telecommunications Act surrendering the public ownership of the digital spectrum to a relatively few interlocking communications giants, Tillich’s point seems to have been made a fortiori in

contemporary America. How are plural voices to be heard in such a market? Who in the media will object to this powerful act of public generosity to private interests?

The spiritual situation in our technical society that Tillich identified in 1954 was one of humankind organized for the production of means. Lost in this process was any real sense of ultimate ends, resulting in the experience of emptiness. All of reality is objectified, with the consequence that an existential relation to things and ideas is lacking, while persons are themselves reduced to competitive and conforming things.

What was the reaction to this situation in the United States? Tillich lists four items. The first is the moral reaction of the younger generation, which longs for "more definite forms of life." The second is an aesthetic reaction of a desire for more classical forms. The third is a religious reaction, with church membership increasing, religious studies departments in demand, and "answers from religion passionately sought." Last, he identifies the danger: religion itself might contribute to the "sacrifice of spirit and person in authoritarian and collectivistic form." Against this, Tillich appeals to the "Protestant principle," perhaps, he says, to be directed against Protestantism (Tillich 1954, 8). No form of life can be identified unambiguously with the ultimate.

When Tillich addressed the world situation in 1945, he looked beyond the American context to the great ideological systems of liberalism, communism, and fascism (Tillich [1945] 1988). Each formed a quasi-religious answer to the problem of modernity. Each of these was an ambiguous response to an ambiguous reality; the creative and destructive remained mixed within them. Today, of course, fascism and communism are restricted to very limited spheres both sociologically and intellectually. The relatively narrow spectrum between the ideas and structures of *laissez-faire* liberalism and democratic liberalism seems to dominate the situation today, with some more mediated forms extant in the European context, such as democratic socialism or the Green Party.

What is the spiritual situation at the turn of the millennium? In the United States, and perhaps by analogy elsewhere, I see a new struggle between two quasi-religious systems. The older liberal form, emerging from modernity, still finds personal identity in competitive and expressive individualism. Sociologically it is manifest in the various styles of structural functionalism, a sociological school grounded in the early work of Durkheim and represented in the twentieth century by such thinkers as Talcott Parsons. Its *laissez-faire* form has been sweeping the competition for two decades, now in Latin America and Asia no less than in Washington, D.C.

But a second quasi-religion is emerging to address the world situation. From its birthplace in higher education it has trickled down to the public schools and public life. It finds authentic human identity not in individual expressiveness or entrepreneurship but in race and ethnicity and

gender. Its ideas are rooted generally in postmodernism, being more at home in post-structuralism than in classical structures, more steeped in deconstruction than in logos. I believe it forms a matrix of the sociological schools of symbolic interactionism (grounded in the classical work of Max Weber and emerging most significantly in the "Chicago School" with thinkers such as George Herbert Mead) and social conflict theory (grounded in the work of Karl Marx and now defining a wide variety of thought including the Frankfurt School of Marcuse and Habermas). It finds its power in identity politics. While racial and ethnic politics themselves are not new, multiculturalism has developed since Tillich wrote of the spiritual situation in our technical society.

Certainly, liberalism upholds the rights of individuals, and multiculturalism recognizes the power of ethnic or racial origins. But liberalism also continues to atomize society, and multiculturalism tends to balkanize it. In either case, the ambiguities of life and of technological civilization that were flagged by Tillich are virtually absent. Perhaps communitarianism today functions like the religious socialism of Tillich's era to protest against the sins of both individualism and collectivism, against both technocratic development and romantic revulsion. It seems to mediate individual moral responsibility and the need for just social structures.

Yet this and similar movements remain the minority voices. The question is whether any movement of the new millennium, much less humankind in general, can address creatively the ambiguities of our technological civilization.

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