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PAUL TILLICH AND BARNETT NEWMAN:
"AN IMAGINATIVE DIALOGUE IN THE THEOLOGY OF ART"

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EDWIN J. GREENLEE

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ABSTRACT

Author: Greenlee, Edwin J.
Institution: Chicago Theological Seminary
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Supervising Professor: Aaron Higashi, Ph.D.

Tillich's pioneering work in the theology of art offers an important way of doing theology in the modern era that resonates with contemporary Christians. While he explored visual art from a variety of historical periods, Tillich did not explore the major mid-twentieth century art movement called Abstract Expressionism. Tillich's approach to the theology of art, particularly from a Christian existentialist perspective, works well with the paintings of a key Abstract Expressionist like Barnett Newman whose life and work paralleled that of Paul Tillich. Due to changes in the practices of contemporary painters such as producing written reflections on their own and their fellow artists' work, today's theologian of art needs to consider this additional material rather than a single visual work of art taken in isolation. Artists' statements and writings, the writing of contemporary critics, as well as that of art historians present theologians an expanded body of material to investigate theologically. This thesis applies such an expanded theological approach to Newman's painting series *Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*.

CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

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CHAPTER 1.

INTRODUCTION

In this work I will examine a series of paintings by American Abstract Expressionist Barnett Newman through the lens of Paul Tillich's theology of art. I begin with two quotations: one from Barnett Newman and the other from Paul Tillich. These help frame my work.

Newman: Why? The Question That Has No Answer

The separation between God and humanity is a major issue in Newman's work. Discussing his series of fourteen paintings entitled *Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani,* the mid-twentieth century Abstract Expressionist painter Barnett Newman wrote:

> 'Lema Sabachthani -Why? Why did you forsake me? Why forsake me? To what purpose? Why? This is the passion. The outcry of Jesus. Not the terrible walk up Via Dolorosa, but the question that has no answer. This overwhelming question that Jesus does not complain, makes today's talk of alienation, as if alienation were a modern invention, an embarrassment. This question that has no answer has been with us so long—since Jesus—since Abraham—Adam—the original question. But the question that has no answer.[1]

This series of paintings is not meant to represent the traditional stations of the Way of the Cross. Rather I see the fourteen paintings, see Figure 1.1, large rectangular paintings made of raw canvas (lacking the usual white underpainting) painted with primarily a

[1] Barnett Newman, *The Stations of the Cross* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1996), 9, quoted in Jane Dillenberger, *Derain, Chagall, Manzi, Picasso, Newman: Secular Art with Sacred Themes* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969) 100-101.

series of black zips, Newman's terminology for the vertical black strips, of various widths and styles. These zips emphasize this original existential question that goes back

Figure 1.1: Barnett Newman, *Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* 1955-1966 [2]

to Adam, the first human being forsaken by God. Humankind and the divine are not united but separated by a deep chasm. Newman tells of this separation of human and divine in painting after painting in the series. He paints and writes as an American Jew in the shadow of the Holocaust of this very central Christian -- and human -- question about the pain, despair, and loneliness of this separation. While there is a single canvas at the end of the series that is completely painted in white, which may imply the hope of

[2] Vallerie Hellstein, "Barnett Newman, The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachtani," Object Narrative, *Conversations: An Online Journal for the Center for the Study of Material and Visual Cultures of Religion* (2014). Source for Figure 1, photograph of installation of the *Stations.*

resurrection but in a very rudimentary fashion this seems too facile a response to millennia of human-divine separation.

Tillich: Tragic Separation of the Human and the Divine

In his work *Art and Society* Tillich, like Newman, saw humankind as separated from the divine. The religious and existentialist task for humankind was to strive to resolve this tragic separation. Tillich wrote:

> Knowledge, art, and communion are three forms of love, three movements toward reunion of that which is separated although they belong to each other. Man stands between the finite he is and the infinite to which he belongs and from which he is excluded. So he creates symbols of his infinity. Man is separated from man and all other beings and so he drives toward reunion with them and the three-fold form of cognitive, artistic, and communal participation.[3]

In this paragraph from his essay, Tillich discusses the separation of humans from all other beings. Such a state of isolation and separation is harmful and not a desirable spiritual or psychological state. For Tillich, humankind is living in stark isolation and seeks union with other beings, most particularly the divine. The artistic sphere is one realm where such union can be envisioned and facilitated. Tillich's language resembles that of the mystics, contemporary as well as ancient, such as Thomas Merton and Theresa of Avila. Some sort of spiritual or contemplative practice, engaged in frequently and with discipline, helps in making this union of human and divine possible. One of these contemplative practices is the encounter with visual art in a spiritual fashion.[4]

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[3] Paul Tillich, "Art and Society," in *On Art and Architecture,* ed. John Dillenberger and Jane Dillenberger (New York: Crossroad Press, 1989), 16-17.

[4] Edwin J. Greenlee, "Paul Tillich and Barnett Newman: Tillich's Theology of Art and Abstract Expressionism," (paper, Chicago Theological Seminary, 2022). In this course paper I began exploring some of the ideas detailed more fully in this thesis.

Thesis Statement

I apply and enhance Tillich's theology of art in an effort to understand the religious aspect of contemporary abstract art. I use Tillich's theology of art in investigating the work of Barnett Newman, in particular his series of paintings *Stations of the Cross / Lema Sabachthani,* and suggest ways to extend Tillich's theological approach to art by using materials beyond the art works themselves including the written statements of the artist, the materials that are used in making the art works, and the writings of contemporaneous critics.

Tillich's theology of art remains important today. By expanding his approach, the theology of art will be more responsive to changes in visual art making and meet the needs of Christians and others who look to art as part of their spiritual path. In chapter one I will discuss these important thinkers including biographical details; in chapter two I will introduce Tillich's theology of art; in chapter three I will discuss Newman's work in more detail; and in chapter four I will analyze Newman's work in terms of Tillich's theology of art.

Tillich and Newman: A Creative Dialog

Next I provide introductions to Tillich and Newman that are germane to my work here. Some biographical details are included in this section since both individuals have a number of similar life circumstances that helps in understanding how their work is related.

Paul Tillich was a Lutheran Theologian from Germany. He served as a chaplain during the First World War for German troops.[5] The experience of the modern battlefield had a profound impact on him. He later attained a professorship in several German universities. While not Jewish, when the Nazis came to power "Tillich was suspended from his teaching position at the University of Frankfurt" [6] because of his writings on socialism. "Through friends, he was able to come to the United States and given a position at Union Theological Seminary"[7] in New York City. He spent many years teaching at Union. Tillich has been characterized as a neoliberal theologian and often stands in contrast to Barth, another major twentieth-century Protestant theologian. By the middle of the twentieth century, Tillich was seen as a major theological influence in the United States, even being featured on the cover of *Time* magazine in the March 16, 1959 issue.[8] While he worked in many areas of theology he is well known for his theology of art. This theology developed from his general interest in the theology of culture. Tillich looked at art that was created over many centuries. The "data" of this art historical survey of "religious art" formed the basis to develop his theology of art. For Tillich, expressionism in painting was the high point of modern religious art. Picasso's *Guernica* was one of Tillich's favorites.

[5] Wilhem Pauck and Marion Pauck, *Paul Tillich: His Life and Thought* (Eugene, OR: WIPF, 2015), 40-46.

[6] Pauck and Pauck, *Life and Thought,* 130-131.

[7] Pauck and Pauck, *Life and Thought*, 134.

[8] Time Magazine, Cover Image, March 16, 1959.

German Expressionism

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the standard for fine art, usually seen as "beauty," established by the art of Ancient Greece and that of the Renaissance ended with German Expressionism. Colonialism and art collecting had filled museums with art from other periods as well as with popular and folk art and "exotic" art from Asia and the Near East. The German Expressionists were particularly enthralled by Romantic German art as well as the style of the Gothic. The works of the medieval painter Grunewald were highly valued by the Expressionists. "The expressionists who felt their isolation from modern society…hoped to find in their search for the transcendental, absolute and infinite in the art of the Middle Ages."[9] This is a type of nostalgia for Medieval Gothic art that united humankind and the divine. Such a nostalgic art would not suffice following a long period of social disruption that included two World Wars, an economic depression and the dangers of the atomic age.

Expressionist artists did not aim at painting the world of appearances that they saw before them. These painters wanted to paint emotion and what they saw as spiritual realities that were not plainly observable to the unaided eye. The idea is to evoke an emotion, a rather strong emotion, and not to recreate in visual art the precisely detailed world visible to everyone.[10]

Expressionism was an extremely important visual art style for Tillich. It is important to note that Tillich used the term "expressionism" in a broader fashion than do

[9] Peter Selz, *German Expressionist Painting* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 18.

[10] Selz, *Expressionist Painting,* 12-21.

art historians. For him, an expressionist artist is one who uses the techniques of German Expressionists. These artists may or may not have done their professional training in German art schools. Tillich saw expressionism as a particular stylistic approach to art making that was not geographically limited. Dillenberger writes that:

> Looking at past history Tillich saw 'expressiveness' – that which is the central ingredient of German Expressionism—in other cultural periods: Byzantine, Romanesque, Gothic, and Baroque, as well as in the critical realism of a small circle of artists who Tillich believed had been able to be realistic without being banal, and who, for him, had become the basis on which he spoke of 'belief-ful' realism.[11]

The Expressionism that Tillich centered on was a period of painting history that focused on negative human experience. The expressive aspect of this period in painting functioned by breaking-up the images used in producing the painting. This fracture reflected the broken post-World War Western society in the early twentieth century. Such imagery reflected a culture and a society that was broken and not cohesive. "Tillich knew that hopes for another future could not be created at will. The spirit of a culture is expressed in art; it is not created by art or by any artifact. Therefore the immediate situation is one in which one can only hope against hope." [12] The art of Expressionism and the historical and social world of the early and mid-twentieth century West was one of division and despair. No longer would dreams of infinite cycles of progress, powered by continuous technological innovation, satisfy. Even the link between humankind and the divine was further ruptured.

[11] John Dillenberger, "Introduction," *On Art and Architecture*, xviii.

[12] Dillenberger, "On Art," xviii.

Reception of Tillich's Theology of Art

Contemporary Tillich scholar and Cambridge academic Russell Re Manning finds that Tillich pursued a sustained theological dialogue with art and was the pre-eminent mid-twentieth century theologian concerned with this aspect of culture. Tillich's work in this area expressed theological creativity and has been extremely important for contemporary theologians of art. Re Manning finds that "Tillich's reflections on the relationships between theology and art were crucial…for his wider project of a theology of culture, itself fundamental to his reformulation of theology as correlative to the concerns of his contemporaries."[13] Re Manning notes the many changes in the visual arts that have taken place in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century in terms of new artistic media and new artistic movements such as ready-mades and popular art.[14] For Re Manning, Tillich's extensive work in the theology of art has given contemporary, twenty-first century theologians and religious individuals the tools necessary to continue the dialogue of art and theology. He writes: "Tillich gave his contemporaries a language with which they could enter into a genuine dialogue with the arts, both in terms of theological interpretation of art and of theological development through art."[15] Tillich's pathbreaking work in the theology of art in the twentieth-century is relevant to today's theologians and forms the starting point for much of their work.

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[13] Russell Re Manning, "Tillich's theology of art," in *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich,* ed. Russell Re Manning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 152.

[14] Re Manning, "Tillich's Theology of Art," 152.

[15] Re Manning, "Tillich's Theology of Art," 152.

When an individual engages with visual art: "something which is rooted in the ground of being is discovered and this discovery presupposes the freedom of man from the given; it presupposes his power to introduce the discovered into the realm of the given in forms which transcend the given. This is what has been called the miracle of art."[16] While art is created from everyday materials, such as wood, canvas, and pigment, the artist's imagination and her dexterity using both "everyday" artistic materials and the techniques of the artist, such as color, design, symbolism, composition, enables her to make something spiritual or deeply transformative. Art that succeeds does three things according to Tillich: "It expresses, it transforms, it anticipates. It expresses man's fear of the reality which he discovers. It transforms ordinary reality in order to give it the power of expressing something which is not itself. It anticipates possibilities of being which transcend the given possibilities."[17] Visual art, in its transformative and expressive functions, offers human beings an opportunity to question, to express and experience deeply felt emotions, and to commune with other human beings as well as with the divine. The art gallery and the museum offer contemporary people of faith the opportunity to explore their deepest and most troubling questions, breathe in the radically exploratory environment of the visual artist, and be open to an experience of oneness and communion.

Tillich underscored the importance of the visual arts to theology. He was a forerunner of modern theologians in seeing the importance of the dialogue of art and theology. Yet he has been criticized for the gaps in his art-historical knowledge as well

[16] Tillich, "Art and Society," 18.

[17] Tillich, "Art and Society," 18.

as his failure to look at the religious dimension of contemporary art. That criticism reflects that the field today, where in interdisciplinary theological and religious studies the professional standards of both disciplines are assumed. Tillich's limitations can be seen as a feature of his early and mid-twentieth century investigations of the theology of contemporary art. Later scholars like art historian-theologians like Jane Dillenberger, who was a friend of Tillich's and taught in the innovative arts and theology program at the Graduate Theological Union[18] in Berkley, California, offered in depth religious and theological examinations of contemporary art, particularly in her monographs on Andy Warhol and Picasso.[19] More recent theologians of art like John de Gruchy[20] emphasize how the social justice aspects of progressive religion are linked to contemporary art. As the discourse on spirituality and spiritual practices have developed, many religious writers have looked at ways to incorporate visual arts into spiritual practices. Examples that I have participated in include using visual artworks, not of an overtly religious content matter, as a focus for group meditation or for retreats.

As interest in contemplation grows, particularly in Christian, Jewish, and secular areas of American society, the visual arts take an important role in these developments. Examples include mindfulness meditation sessions taking place in art museums and

[18] Jane Daggett Dillenberger and John Handley, *The Religious Art of Pablo Picasso* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), xi-xii.

[19] Jane Dillenberger, *The Religious Art of Andy Warhol* (New York: Continuum Press, 2001) and Jane Daggett Dillenberger and John Handley, *The Religious Art of Pablo Picasso* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

[20] John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

galleries;[21] workshops and guide books on contemplative photography, and churches using part of their space to host visual art shows, often with accompanying discussions.

Tillich draws heavily on existentialism in his theology of art. This is still an area of interest to theologians today. A key contemporary theologian who is reintroducing and emphasizing Tillich's entire theological enterprise, including his theology of art, is Russell Re Manning of Cambridge University. He not only looks at the existential work of Tillich but also his work on social issues, for example in his collection "the Radical Tillich."[22]

My thesis also explores the search for a spiritual foundation for the Abstract Expressionists' artwork throughout the twentieth century. This discourse within the art world had often led to controversy. Here I point to Kandinsky's "*Concerning the Spiritual in Art*"[23] and a large exhibition and its accompanying catalog "*The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1980*"[24] which includes a discussion of Newman as well as other abstract artists. Spirituality has had many meanings for these artists and some of the discourse involving "the spiritual" concerned what we often classify as marginal, non-hegemonic religious or spiritual worlds such as those of Theosophy and Hermeticism among many others. Another publication, an edited volume entitled *God in The Modern*

[21] One example is the weekly mindfulness meditation sessions that include an examination of key artworks held at the Rubin Museum of Art in New York City. This program is recorded and also offered as a podcast. https://rubinmuseum.org/events/series/mindfulness-meditation/

[22] Russell Re Manning (ed.), *Retrieving the Radical Tillich: His Legacy and Contemporary Importance* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2015).

[23] Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (New York: Dover Publications, 1977).

[24] Maurice Tuchman, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985* (Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1986).

Wing: Viewing Art with the Eyes of Faith,[25] edited by Anderson and Hansen, focuses on spirituality and modern art, in this instance with examples from the Art Institute of Chicago.

Many churches also connect with modern art. My own denomination, the Episcopal Church, often features visual art exhibits in their sacred spaces. Large churches, particularly Episcopal Cathedrals, offer space for exhibits and integrate video overviews on their webpages, on-site small group discussions, and even retreats that are centered on a particular exhibit. These exhibits frequently link to the church's social justice ministries and focus on topics like the ramifications of slavery, ending gun violence, LGBTQ rights, and the environment. These are all ways of integrating theology or spirituality and visual art. The development of Tillich's theology of art is a precursor to many of these practices. Another activity taking place within Christian communities is the contemplative discipline of *Visio Divina*[26] which is related to the biblically-centered *Lexio Divina* but which focuses on visual images rather than the bible or other religious texts.

Barnett Newman, Abstract Expression and *The Stations*

Newman was part of the New York School of Art termed Abstract Expressionism[27] that flourished in the United States during the mid- and late-twentieth century. The Abstract Expressionists exiled figures and objects from their paintings and stated that the subject matter of their work was the process of painting itself. While

[25] Cameron J. Anderson and G. Walter Hansen (eds.), *God in the Modern Wing: Viewing Art with the Eyes of Faith* (Westmont, Il.: IVP Academic, 2021).

[26]Theresa Kay. *Meeting God through Art: Visio Divina* (New Haven, Independent Publishing, 2019).

[27] David Anfam, *Abstract Expressionism*, 2nd ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2015), 14.

formal aspects of painting such as materials, size of the work, and composition were all important, these painters were not interested in making art that mirrored the real world. Abstract Expressionism flourished particularly from the 1940's to the 1970's. Two types of painting are termed Abstract Expressionist, action painting and color field painting. Action painting artists use dynamic gestures in applying paint to canvas. These gestures are linked to the emotions generated in the creation of the artwork. A prime example of an action painter is Jackson Pollock, particularly in his mature works. Color field painters use large fields of color to convey emotion. Barnett Newman is a prime example of a color field painter as are Mark Rothko and Helen Frankenthaler. For Newman's mature painting style, see figure1.2. Both Newman and Rothko intended viewers of their classic works to have a spiritual experience.[28] Often Newman and Rothko use size as well as color in creating their works. They engage with the notion of the sublime, which implies an experience that can instill terror or bliss, in the viewer. Modern uses of the term sublime began in the seventeenth century and have been an important part of art historical and

Figure 1.2: Barnett Newman, *The First Station: The Stations of the Cross*, 1958, magna on canvas, (77.8 in x 60.5 in) National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

[28] This is seen in the Rothko Chapel in Houston which explicitly is for meditation and contemplation. Newman's Stations offer a spiritual experience in the National Gallery of Art. The "search for the spiritual" was discussed earlier in this chapter in the Abstract Expressionist discussion about the content of abstract art works. https://www.rothkochapel.org/.

aesthetics discourse since the twentieth-century.[29] Abstract Expressionist painters are known for a focus on the individual, an attempt to evoke deep emotion in the viewers of their works and a trust in art to accurately convey human experience and emotion rather than an almost photographic reproduction of a slice of the outside world by means of paint and canvas.

The connection of Abstract Expressionist art like that of Newman to "primitive art" also shared a deeply existential concern, being situated in the era just after the violent horrors earlier in the twentieth century. Newman, like many Abstract Expressionist painters, pondered the significance of the subject matter of his paintings. Shiff, in an introduction to a text of Newman's interviews and writings, looked at Newman's life experiences taken together with his investigation of primitive art, and stated that:

> Newman's sense of the primitive, 'abstract' art was not formal but anthropological; he understood this imagery in terms of the human condition to which it responded. His own artistic enterprise was shaped by the terrors of modern culture—Nazism, the Bomb, totalitarian rule…To find imagery adequate to this particular condition was Newman's problem—one for which primitive abstraction could serve as a point of reference, a beginning.[30]

Like other Abstract Expressionist painters, he searched for a means in the materials of the visual arts to express these concerns. How could terror, the horrors of Fascism and Nazism, and America's "age of anxiety" be given adequate expression in the visual arts?

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[29] Simon Morled, ed., The Sublime: Documents of Contemporary Art (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).

[30] Richard Shiff, "Introduction," in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews, ed.* John P. O'Neil (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), xv.

How would viewers and critics understand the existential dimensions and implied historical background of the Abstract Expressionist school of painting?[31]

Interestingly, a number of Abstract Expressionist artists were involved with producing commissioned art for religious spaces.[32] These were often Christian sacred spaces. The painter Marc Rothko and his famous chapel in Houston, Texas is one example. Another is the sculptor Louise Nevelson who is known for her work in the Good Shephard Chapel in St. Peter's Lutheran Church in mid-town Manhattan. Interestingly, Rothko and Nevelson, like Barnett Newman, were Jewish.[33]

I will focus on Barnett Newman's late installation work, *Stations of the Cross*, that is made up of fourteen large canvases displayed as a series. The topic of the *Stations of the Cross* is a classic Christian theme, particularly in the more liturgical traditions in the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches. Newman's *Stations* are in the collection of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. He was a painter, an art critic, and a philosopher. Tillich was a theologian and philosopher. Their careers were both at a high point in the middle of the twentieth century. Both Tillich and Newman worked in the shadows of two World Wars. The horrors of Nazism and Fascism were formative experiences for them. Tillich's work in the theology of art looked at visual culture throughout the ages but he never seriously engaged the mid-century American painting

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[31] David Anfam, *Abstract Expressionism*, 2nd ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2015). Anfam offers a concise survey of illustrations of the key works of Abstract Expressionism.

[32] Laurie Wilson, "The Many Dimensions of Louise Nevelson," in *Religion and Art in the Heart of Modern Manhattan: St. Peter's Church and the Louise Nevelson Chapel,* ed. Aaron Rosen (New York: Routledge, 2016), 103-122.

[33] Aaron Rosen, "Jewish Artists in Christian Spaces: Chagall, Rothko, and Nevelson," in *Religion and Art in the Heart of Modern Manhattan: St. Peter's Church and the Louise Nevelson Chapel*, ed. Aaron Rosen (New York: Routledge, 2016). 123-144.

tradition of Abstract Expressionism. I examine Tillich's analysis of visual art and see how his approach would be enriched if he analyzed Newman's *Stations.*[34] I selected this series by Newman having viewed the *Stations* during a comprehensive retrospective show at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2002.[35] I enjoy Newman's work and was particularly moved when I encountered the *Stations* for the first time at that show in Philadelphia.[36]

For many, religious art is seen as art that contains images or references to Biblical narratives or that portray sacred persons or those who were important in the history of the Church. However, Tillich alludes to the sacred content of religious art when he writes: "I boldly [suggest] that the most expressive form of art today in connection with religion might be sacred emptiness; an emptiness which does not pretend to have at its disposal symbols which it actually does not have. In all realms of life today we have some emptiness. It can become desperate emptiness; it can become sacred emptiness."[37] I find Tillich's concept of sacred emptiness useful in examining contemporary visual art. States of inner being, feelings of isolation or loneliness are sacred. So too are feelings of joy,

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[34] Mark C. Taylor, *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture and Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). Taylor is a contemporary theologian of art using existentialism and later postmodernism. His seminal work in the theology of art and architecture is *Disfiguring*. Taylor discusses Newman's work and, on pages 88-89, examines *Stations*.

[35] Images of an installation of Newman's Stations of the Cross are available at this site: Valeries Hellsteij, "Barnett Newman, The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachtani," Object Narrative, in *Conversations: An Online Journal of the Center for the Study of Material and Visual Cultures of Religion* (2014), https://mavcor.yale.edu/conversations/object-narratives/barnett-newman-stations-cross-lema-sabachtani.

[36] Two catalogs offering extensive illustrations and discussions of Newman's *Stations of the Cross* are: Anne Temkin, ed., *Barnett Newman* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2002) and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, *Barnett Newman: The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1966).

[37] Tillich, "Art and Society," 40.

awe and wonder. The way in which these feelings are expressed abstractly are vital in contemporary art. A more nuanced and deeper examination of a work of visual art is necessary for theology to engage abstract art.

Contemporary art expresses meaning in a variety of ways. Examples include the size of the artwork in relation to the viewer, the composition of the work, and the materials that are used in its creation. Looking at Newman's work and knowing of his art historical context as an American Abstract Expressionist painter who worked during the mid- to late-twentieth century are all keys to understanding the religious meaning of a contemporary painting series like the *Stations.* Also, the fact that Newman was both a philosopher and writer of art criticism, who reflected upon the meaning of his own artwork offer additional information for the theologian while thinking about the artwork's theological significance. Modern artists exist within a matrix of museums, art critics, historians of art, the work of peer artists, art publications as well as the broader historical, cultural and spiritual movements of a particular time.

CHAPTER 2.

TILLICH'S THEOLOGY OF ART

In this chapter I look in detail at Tillich's writings on the theology of art. I focus on aspects most relevant to an exploration of Newman's works. Most of the discussion will focus on Tillich's writings on the theology of art after he came to the United States, specifically the role of existentialism in Tillich's thought and the limitations and/or weaknesses of Tillich's approach to the theology of art.

Tillich saw the importance of art as play. In this I see a connection to Huizinga's work *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*[1] which was originally published in 1938. Tillich, like Huizinga, saw play as an important and serious activity related to the creation and sustaining of cultural activities such as visual arts and musical performance. For Tillich, the serious play of art making is central to the exercise of the creative imagination. In this respect, he viewed painting as the most significant form of art. In the words of Tillich's biographers, William and Marion Pauck, for Tillich painting "was a prophetic art and the expression of the most beatific mode of human freedom. He concluded that the only genuine kind of painting, the only painting worthy of the term 'great,' is that which allows the power of being to shine through the forms and colors on the canvas…"[2] Tillich saw visual art, and painting in particular, as a key aspect of culture. In turn painting related to religion in that "religion 'is the substance of culture,'

[1] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2009) Kindle.

[2] Wilhem and Marion Pauck, *Paul Tillich: His Life and Thought* (Eugene, Or: Wipf & Stock, 1976) 78.

while culture is the form through which religion expresses itself."[3] Thus the connection between religion, culture and art is viewed as a significant interrelationship for human societies. Tillich's appreciation for the visual arts was central to his philosophy and theology of culture.

Tillich was interested in a variety of visual art works from the medieval to the modern. The Paucks found that Tillich "regarded Grunewald's 'Crucifixion' with its depiction of Christ's horrible wounds as 'the most religious of all paintings.' He called Picasso's *Guernica* a great Protestant painting, perhaps the greatest of modern time."[4] Tillich expressed an interest in a variety of paintings from different historical eras. He was also interested in architecture, a profession he once considered pursuing early in life.

Tillich found that the golden glow of Byzantine icons with their sumptuous sheets of gold leaf, opened the experience of the holy to those who viewed those artworks. He was also attracted to medieval cathedrals and their stained-glass windows. The light entering through the multi-colored glass, Tillich thought, offered an entry to the sacred. The effect of stained glass: "'permitted the light of God's spirit to penetrate man's darkness.' The Cathedral at Chartres [embodied] the consummate perfection of the medieval artform…He was convinced that the old church architects knew that 'aesthetic expressiveness is more than a beautifying addition to the life of worship.'" [5] Tillich is looking at art in an aesthetic way, in a way that focuses on the materials used in art

[3] Pauck, "Tillich," 78.

[4] Pauck, *Tillich*, 88-89.

[5] Pauck, *Tillich*, 88-89.

making and their impact on the viewer. The visual arts are not merely an addition to religion but an integral media for living out faith. While many of the examples offered by Tillic contained images that referenced Christianity, the materials themselves - gold leaf reflecting candle light and colored glass fragments filtering sunlight - have a material and spiritual impact on the participant regardless of her denominational affiliation or religious tradition.

Existentialism

Existentialism plays an important role in Tillich's approach to theology in general and his theology of art in particular. As he writes: "Religion means being ultimately concerned, asking the question of 'to be or not to be' with respect to the meaning of one's existence, and having symbols in which this question is answered. This is the largest and most basic concept of religion."[6]

Thiessen reminds us that in looking at Tillich's theology of art, it is important to keep in mind Tillich's definition of religion. "He defines religion as 'being ultimately concerned…about one's self and one's world'. In a more particular sense religion connotes the existence of (a) God(s) with a set of symbols, rituals and doctrinal formulations. When we discuss religion and art we have to 'speak in terms of both concepts.'"[7] Looking at art such as that of the Abstract Expressionists and Newman in

[6] Paul Tillich, "Existential Aspects of Modern Art," in *On Art and Architecture,* ed. John Dillenberger and Jane Dillenberger (New York: Crossroad Press, 1989) 92.

[7] Gesa Thiessen, "Religious Art is Expressionistic," *Irish Theological Review* 59, No, 4 (1993): 302-311, 303.

particular, I find the second description of religion as "being ultimately concerned" is the most relevant and will connect best with the ideas that Newman expresses in the *Stations*.

For Tillich, twentieth century culture and art was engaged in a serious dialog with religious existentialism. He connected his examination of religion – being ultimately concerned – about human existence, the conditions of that existence, feelings of alienation and estrangement that accompanied socio-economic changes in modern life, as well as the keen awareness of the "finitude" of human existence. These aspects of deeply felt ultimate concern were the subject matter of contemporary religion. Tillich also saw a more traditional understanding of religion:

> religion as having a set of symbols, normally of divine beings or a divine being, having symbolic statements about the activities of these gods or this god, having ritual activities and doctrinal formulations about their relationship to us. This is religion in the narrower sense, where religion is identified first of all as a belief in the existence of a God, and then with intellectual and practical activities following out of this belief.[8]

I find that when twenty-first century audiences look at religion and art, or look to art to offer them the experience of contemplating the divine, Tillich's idea of questions about and experiences of ultimate concern supersede traditional imaging of God, sacred persons, and Christian doctrines. That said, some artists working from the perspective of liberation theology re-envision traditional religious themes, such as the personage of Jesus, the Passion, and the Exodus story in politically, socially relevant contemporary contexts.

I believe that Tillich would have resonated with Newman's *Stations of the Cross* and would have found a rich source of inspiration in the work of this philosopher-painter coming out of a similar historical and cultural background as Tillich and sharing similar

[8] Tillich, "Existential Aspects," 92.

existential concerns such as the ultimate meaning of life following a half-century of world-wide war and devastation. I also find it interesting, in terms of symbols that resonate in the area of ultimate concern that Newman - an artist who was raised as a Jew - selected the Stations of the Cross and Jesus's cry from the Cross, *Eli, Eli Lama Sabachthani*, as his inspiration for this series of paintings. This cry of ultimate alienation and feeling of abandonment from and by the divine, used as the title of this painting series, makes them contemporary religious paintings that are very relevant to today's theologian of art.

Some of Newman's groundbreaking work was made and displayed in prominent venues during the 1960's. This was a period of social, political and artistic turmoil in the United States and around the Western world. Newman started writing art criticism at this time. While his main artistic impulse found expression in paint on canvas as well as in sculpture, his work in art criticism was important. O'Neil, formerly editor-in-chief at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, edited a hundred-page monograph with Newman's writings in art criticism.[9]

Tillich's theological exploration of visual art offers an insight that transcends traditional Christianity, and even belief in a particular religious tradition. By looking deeply at religion as humankind's attempt to raise issues of ultimate concern, Tillich offers an approach that is useful to those who are "spiritual but not religious," as well as those who adhere to Christianity and other faith traditions. In a sense, Tillich sees art as a human expression of the desire and need to transform our chaotic and seemingly

[9] Barnett Newman, *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews,* ed. John P. O'Neil (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

meaningless world into something meaningful. Through art, humankind creatively participates in divine creation while simultaneously allowing us to question the world in which we live and through this practice to bring about some semblance of order and meaning to an individual's lived experience. Art serves as a spiritual practice that exists outside of religious institutions as a means of meeting the divine within the realm of human experience. It also expresses deeply significant questions of life and death.

Particular to Tillich's theology of culture, which includes his theology of art, is the method of correlation. Gonzalez details this method: Individuals as well as societies, existing in a state of brokenness ask important existential questions. The theologian of culture explores those issues and then looks at religious teachings and texts and uses them in responding to those questions.[10] In the first volume of *Systematic Theology* Tillich spells out one important way that correlation works in the context of religion. He writes:

> The divine-human relationship is a correlation also in its cognitive side. Symbolically speaking, God answers man's questions, and under the impact of God's answers man asks them. Theology formulates the questions implied in human existence, and theology formulates the answers implied in divine self-manifestation under the guidance of the questions implied in human existence. This is a circle which drives man to a point where question and answer are not separated. This point, however, is not a moment in time. It belongs to man's essential being, to the unity of his finitude with the infinity in which he was created and from which he is separated. A symptom of both the essential unity and the existential separation of finite man from his infinity is his ability to ask about the infinite to which he belongs: the fact that he must ask about it indicates that he is separated from it…[11]

[10] Justo L. Gonzales, *Essential Theological Terms*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005) 39.

[11] Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume I: Reason and Revelation/Being and God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951) 61.

The existential situation of humankind, the response by the divine, and the interpretive work of the theology are thus laid out.

While Tillich believed that the greatest religious art of the twentieth century was produced by expressionist painters, he considered Picasso's *Guernica*, figure 2.1, a prime

Figure 2.1: Pablo Picasso, Guernica, 1937, oil on canvas, 11 ft 5 in x 25 ft 6 in, Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain.

example of religious art dealing with ultimate concern. In the context of this Picasso painting, Tillich writes:

> The question of man in a world of guilt, anxiety, and despair is put before us with tremendous power. But it is not the subject matter—the willful and brutal destruction of a small town by Fascist airplanes—which gives the picture its expressive force; Rather it is its style…A comparison of any important creation within this period with equally important creations of any earlier period shows the stylistic unity of the visual arts in the twentieth century.[12]

I agree with Tillich that humankind in the twentieth century lived in a world of anxiety and despair. Christians, indeed all citizens in America in the twenty-first century, also experience anxiety and despair in the midst of fascist political movements, the surge of

[12] Paul Tillich, "Protestantism and Artistic Style," in *On Art and Architecture,* ed. John Dillenberger and Jane Dillenberger (New York: Crossroad Press, 1989) 120.

white Christian Nationalism in our county's political and civil life, and the work of the far right to take back and restrict the rights of large groups of minority citizens. Examples of this include the outlawing of abortion in many states[13] after the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*; the continuation of systematic racism in this country;[14] the proliferation of antidemocratic voter suppression laws;[15] and legislation that attacks the LGBTQ+ community.[16] In this cultural and spiritual milieu, art is important for us to express our deepest religious and spiritual feelings, to express matters of deepest concern. Tillich correctly directs our sight to visual creations. But his focus solely on expressionist style in visual art to express deepest concern is limiting. This topic will be covered in greater detail later in this chapter.

Reception of Tillich's Theology of Art

Tillich created an innovative approach to doing the theology of art that often focused on art work that was not traditionally considered religious. In this instance he looks at contemporary art that did not depict traditional religious or Christian themes. Often these were works of art of the twentieth-century that were innovative in their presentation and the techniques used. Examples here includes cubism, surrealism, and

[13] New York Times, "Tracking Abortion Bans Across the Country," *New York Times*, December 8, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/us/abortion-laws-roe-v-wade.html.

[14] Warren, Michael. "Annual Report Shows Systemic. Racism Continues to Bring Down Black People's Quality of Life, " PBS News Hour, April 12, 2022. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/annual-report-shows-systemic-racism-continues-to-bring-down-black-peoples-quality-of-life.

[15] Brennan Center for Justice, "Voting Laws Roundup: October 2023," October 18, 2023 https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-laws-roundup-october-2023?_ga=2.203428624.1034186426.1701308570-1844645478.1701308570.

[16] ACLU, "Mapping Attacks on LGBTQ Rights in U.S. State Legislatures," December 20, 2023 https://www.aclu.org/legislative-attacks-on-lgbtq-rights-2023.

the work of artists like Picasso. Innovative art making required an innovative theology of art.

Thiessen and John Dillenberger highlight the limitations of Tillich's theology of art. Yet these critiques point out the fact that Tillich took an innovative approach as he looked at visual art through the lens of theology. He went beyond what many Christian theologians saw as "religious art" and engaged with more modern art that did not emphasize realism or use traditional Christian imagery. Thiessen notes that "During the First World War Tillich discovered art, an experience which is crucial for him as a reaction to the destruction and horrors of war."[17] The experience of the horrors of the battlefield chaplain could be expressed in visual art. Tillich used the term expressionistic in a way that is more encompassing and less precise than an historian of art would. As Thiessen reminds us, for Tillich all of human culture, and most particularly art, was infused with a "religious dimension."[18]

Thiessen summarizes one strand of criticism of Tillich's theology of art: Tillich did not offer detailed and comprehensive examinations of the visual artworks that he discussed theologically. Looking at an analysis of a painting by van Gogh, Thiesen notes that Tillich:

> mentions van Gogh's *Starry Night* as an example of 'showing depths of reality below the surface'. In fact, his interpretation is not sufficient. *Starry Night* is a deeply visionary picture which van Gogh painted only a year before his suicide. It could be seen as a premonition of his death, the spiral forms of the stars, full of movement, reveal his disturbed state of mind at the time. The insufficient interpretation of this particular painting illustrates a certain weakness in Tillich's treatment of theology and art. While he had undoubtedly a great love for and good

[17] Thiessen, "Expressionistic," 302.

[18] Thiessen, "Expressionistic," 302.

> knowledge of (modern) art, his description of particular works of art tends to be somewhat superficial.[19]

In the contemporary era the analysis of the theology of art requires understanding art historical and critical publications and the need to consider the importance of technical rigor, vis a vis knowledge of art materials, art making practices, and current art historical scholarship. This more comprehensive approach to the theology of art was found more in art history scholarship. While Tillich had a great appreciation for and knowledge of modern art, he did not have the academic background that today's art historians, and perhaps some contemporary theologians of art, possess.

Another supporter who is critical of Tillich's work is John Dillenberger. Dillenberger notes that Tillich opened many potential possibilities for the theological investigation of visual art but Tillich's theological work was not "[faithful] to the artworks themselves [and therefore his analyses were] unconvincing to critics and art historians'. Dillenberger rightly regards this lack of faithfulness to the art objects as the most problematic aspect in Tillich's theology of art."[20] The rigor of art historical and art critical research can remedy many of these deficiencies and make his theological approach useful in examining the spiritual and religious dimensions of today's visual art. With contemporary artworks, theologians can also dialog with working artists to gain greater insight to the modern art making process as well as learn from the many textual works that today's visual artists often produce.

Tillich's existential understanding of God as ultimate reality was a crucial theological development that enabled him to go beyond an examination of visual art

[19] Thiessen, "Expressionistic," 304.

[20] Thiessen, "Expressionistic," 304.

works that contain traditional religious themes and images and encounter the religious or spiritual in contemporary art. Thiessen views that as a crucial contribution by Tillich. Thiessen indicates that

> As the possibilities of theologies of modern/post-modern art are still pursued only by a tiny minority of theologians, Tillich's attempt is still a somewhat lonely landmark in this field…Tillich's view that modern 'profane' works of art can convey ultimate concern is a logical conclusion of his central idea that religion and culture, the divine and the world are not two different spheres but should essentially form a union.[21]

Tillich's theological approach to art is a major modern contribution to Christian theology. Tillich broadened the types of visual art that are recognized as having religious importance and as a result the dialog of Christian theology and contemporary art is widened and has the potential to engage more congregations and individual Christians today.

Contemporary Art, Religious Issues, and Ultimate Concern

Thiessen also observes that while Tillich presumed that the connection of art and religion was positive, a number of visual artists today produce controversial works that some view as non-religious. Looking more closely, Thiessen suggests that a differentiation should be made between art that addresses religious concerns and art that critiques the church and church hierarchies. Many artists, who today take religion and spirituality seriously criticize the church for its shortcoming as an institution. These artists see Jesus as important to their life journeys. Jesus "through his radical witness reveals God to those who suffer in a seemingly godless world…One may therefore

[21] Thiessen, "Expressionistic," 305.

conclude that while some modern art is very critical towards the Church, much of twentieth century art still has a Christian, religious or at least spiritual dimension."[22]

Dillenberger faults Tillich's analysis of expressionistic art works as lacking depth. Dillenberger offers the example of Tillich's presumption that many expressionistic paintings depict alienation and estrangement, but these judgments do not rest on a deep analysis of the visual art, of artist statements or other documentation to support the assumption of estrangement as the deliberate objective of expressionist artists. "Instead of analyzing works of art so as to arrive at conclusions on the religious dimension in art he applied his theology directly to Expressionist paintings. Because of this unfortunate method of interpretation his 'theory has found little favor with art historians and philosophers of art'".[23]

John Dillenberger, who worked with Tillich and edited the monograph containing Tillich's key essays and articles on the theology of art, articulates some of Tillich's limitations in his approach to examining art, particularly modern art. With Tillich's major focus on Expressionism, he failed to engage with Abstract Expressionism. Dillenberger suggests, and I completely agree, that the works of this mid-twentieth century North American school of art would dialog well with Tillich's theology of art. As Dillenberger notes, many Abstract Expressionist paintings:

> resonated with the expressions of the tragic, the sublime, the demonic—all elements familiar to Tillich's cultural analysis. Yet Tillich did not seem to see or to understand this fully since the style of these paintings in their large format with their vast areas of often unarticulated color, did not accord with the mode of Expressionism in which the surface is broken through and disrupted by forms from the depths, as in *Guernica*…In his own life and the history he knew, Tillich had experienced the destructiveness expressed in *Guernica*. He had also

[22] Thiessen, "Expressionistic," 306.

[23] Thiessen, "Expressionistic," 307-308.

> experienced the ecstasy of the sublime as evidenced in his own account of experiencing Botticelli's *Madonna and Child with Singing Angels.*[24]

Dillenberger also notes that Tillich resonated with many of the emotions that the Abstract Expressionists communicated through their paintings, though Tillich never acknowledged the relevance of this art to his theology of art. Further, Dillenberger notes that Tillich's mature work in theology would have greatly benefited from an exploration of this art.[25]

Dillenberger sees Tillich as having had a preference for art that was not completely abstract, that still contained echoes of realism[26] but did not produce an almost mechanical copy of everyday reality in paint on canvas. The Abstract Expressionist artists explored various types of abstraction which did not appeal to Tillich. Somewhat ironically, styles of painting that predominated in the late twentieth century, such as the art of Keith Haring that drew on street art as well as the Pop Art movement typified by Andy Warhol would likely have been attractive for Tillich to engage with theologically. Dillenberger notes that "Having missed the full power of Abstract Expressionism, Tillich continued to use his categories of expressive art without modification. This was unfortunate, for the Abstract Expressionist movement could have also given new nuances to his theories of expressionistic art."[27] Dillenberger notes that had Tillich investigated the works of the Abstract Expressionists he would have found a style of painting that

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[24] John Dillenberger, "Introduction," in *On Art and Architecture,* ed. John Dillenberger and Jane Dillenberger (New York: Crossroad Press, 1989) xviii-xix.

[25] John Dillenberger, "Introduction," *On Art*, xix-xx.

[26] Dillenberger,"Introduction," *On Art*, xxi.

[27] Dillenberger, "Introduction, " *On Art*, xxi.

dealt with tragic and sublime themes with a content that did not contain realist echoes. Newman, like other Abstract Expressionists, embraces the tragedies of life, asks deep questions about the meaning of life, and encompasses the destructive as well as the beautiful aspects of life.

Enriching Tillich's Theology of Art

An enriched theology of art must focus on various aspects of artistic creation: the materials of the artwork; the size of the artwork, particularly in relationship to the size of the observer; the intentions of the artist in crafting the work; and the way that the art-viewing public reflects on this activity in galleries or museums. We also need to look at the context of the body of the artist's work, other artists who are or were active at the same time, what the artist writes about his or her own art making, and what art critics say about the work.

The work of art exists within a broader historical and cultural matrix. Understanding a work of art in religious terms requires the theologian to mine all of these sources of insight and information in "holistically viewing" a piece of art such as Newman's *Stations.*

Tillich particularly focuses on Christian symbols. He astutely notes that the Cross is a recurrent theme, central to many works of religious art while there are few visual expressions of the Resurrection. Tillich examines the relationship of the Cross and Resurrection and labels it the current Protestant element in visual art. He finds that:

> No premature solutions should be tried; rather, the human situation in its conflicts should be expressed courageously. If it is expressed, it is already transcended: He who can bear and express guilt shows that he already knows about 'acceptance-in-

> spite-of.' He who can bear and express meaninglessness shows that he experiences meaning within his desert of meaninglessness.[28]

Tillich is articulating a Christian existential analysis.

Limits of Tillich's Theology of Art in the Modern Context

While most scholars applauded Tillich's pioneering work in the theology of art, particularly with respect to contemporary visual art, there were a number of critics. In this section I look at the critiques offered by Dillenberger and Thiesen. In chapter one, I mentioned the work of Re Manning who is a contemporary scholar re-evaluating the work of Tillich's theology of art and culture for today's theologians. Some contemporaries felt that Tillich was too focused in his analysis of earlier art historical styles. He was too narrow in his definition of twentieth century contemporary art that spoke to humankind's Ground of Being. He clung too closely to the technical aspects of German Expressionism and failed to perceive the importance that a new style of art, Abstract Expressionism, that was being born, would offer mid- and late-twentieth century audiences an alternative approach to the spiritual.

Contemporary visual art has expanded with new media, such as video, performance and land art, as well as new styles of painting and drawing which were nascent when Tillich constructed his theology of art. His theology of art would have been enriched and strengthened by an examination of and reflection upon the work of the Abstract Expressionist artists.

> [T]he Abstract Expressionist movement could have also given new nuances to his theories of expressionistic art. It was precisely the nature of this movement to

[28] Tillich, "Protestantism and Artistic Style," 124.

> combine a non-naturalistic style with a content which included the tragic and the grand or sublime. Here was an art in which the subject matter was not a recognizable one, and in which the polarities of form and import, fundamental to his thinking about art, were genuinely expressed. Here was an art in which the surface was not necessarily disrupted, a qualification so central to Tillich's view of expressionistic art. Yet this art had depth and ultimacy, and the range of the human condition.[29]

Tillich's theology of contemporary art was not flexible enough to deal with the work of the Abstract Expressionists. During the mid- and late-twentieth century, visual arts proliferated and a wide variety of styles were employed. Artists during this time often spoke and wrote profusely about their works. They took great care in choosing the titles of their works. The way in which they worked with a wide variety of artistic media, some traditional and some novel, was a part of the meaning-making of their artworks.

Tillich's focus on expressionism as the paradigm for the visual representation of the estrangement of contemporary people from the divine, each other, and society limits his vision of religious works of art. Dillenberger notes that while in America Tillich visited all of the major art museums, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York; the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. and the Art Institute of Chicago, all locations where he would have had the opportunity to view the work of the Abstract Expressionists. However, Tillich remained focused on German Expressionism and his notion of how "expression" was evidenced in earlier art historical periods. Dillenberger notes that Tillich "lost living contact with new movements in the arts….The result was that he had continued to see all of the visual arts through the prism of German Expressionism…"[30]

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[29] Dillenberger, "Introduction," Tillich, *On Art and Architecture*, xxi.

[30] Dillenberger, "Introduction," in Tillich, *On Art and Architecture*, xvi.

Kandinsky wrote of art and spirituality with a different sense of meaning.[31] As Thiessen indicates: "When Kandinsky speaks of the spiritual in art, he is not, as Tillich might suppose, speaking of a specific religious concern but of a desire to connect the visual material in art to the inner life of the artist."[32] Other contemporary artists, particularly those who worked abstractly, explored religion and spirituality in their work and continue to do so. Theologians of art need to engage more with the writings and interviews of these artists to appreciate their exploration of the spiritual in painting, sculpture, and newer media such as video and environmental art.

Works of visual art can serve as points to connect with the divine and engage with matters of ultimate concern. Tillich's theology of art allows us to talk about, contemplate, and "think with" visual works of art. As a result of Tillich's work in this area an encounter with the divine through the visual arts: "is no longer restricted to certain predetermined, theologically relevant themes for subject matter: art itself is the subject of theological interest, in all its disparate manifestations, from Botticelli to Warhol, from Dante and science fiction, from Shakespeare to The Sopranos."[33]

Visual arts are an important part of all cultures. Christianity has engaged with and made use of these arts throughout its history. By opening the category of religious art to include visual works that do not have explicitly religious content, Tillich allows us to

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[31] Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (New York: Dover Publications, 1977).

[32] Gesa Thiessen, "Religious Art is Expressionistic: A Critical Appreciation of Paul Tillich's Theology of Art," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 59 no. 4 (1993): 302-311, 307.

[33] Russell Re Manning. "Tillich's Theology of Art," in *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich,* ed. Re Manning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 200), 153-154.

appreciate a much broader spectrum of visual works. Also, as churches and other religious organizations lose membership, many people are looking for spirituality and a connection with the divine outside of specifically defined sacred spaces. Engaging with visual art, particularly modern visual art, opens this area of dialogue to a much broader array of persons.

CHAPTER 3.

BARNETT NEWMAN'S ART

In chapter three I look in depth at Newman's painting series *The Stations* and the place of the series in his larger oeuvre. In looking at Barnet Newman's art it is important to contextualize it with the works of his fellow Abstract Expressionists, particularly painters like Rothko. The discussions among artists during the 1940's to 1970's about meaning and spirituality are important. I don't believe that a creation of a visual work of art such as a painting can be appreciated and examined in isolation. What artists and their colleagues say about the meaning of their work must be considered as part of the creative process.

Newman and the Abstract Expressionists

The Abstract Expressionists frequently looked to the works and techniques of what was then termed "primitive art," that is the art of Native Americans or that of indigenous cultures in Africa or the South Pacific Islands. Those artists frequently made a link between their borrowings from "primitive," non-Western art-making traditions, and the search for the spiritual or religious. The art-making techniques that these artists employed were also drawn from the techniques of these "primitive" artists or modified in some form to elicit the emotions that these techniques drew forth in both traditional and modern artists. Shiff writes that:

> In his own critical writings, Newman often focused on primitive art, noting its capacity to express the most intense and perhaps most honest emotion, terror…Newman's own appreciation (of primitivism linked to modernism)

> derived not so much from formal interest but rather from what he called 'subject matter,' the thoughts of man in the face of the tragic and the terrifying…[1]

Newman here hints at notions of the sublime as important for understanding contemporary abstract art. The sublime was a concept that carried the idea of an overwhelming aspect of nature or work of art that induced in the viewer feelings of both dread and awe.[2] The connection of Abstract Expressionist artists like Newman to "primitive art" also revealed a deeply existential concern, being situated in the era just after the violent horrors of two world wars and the sociopolitical upheaval earlier in the century. Newman, like many Abstract Expressionist painters, looked to his practice of painting to express these concerns.

How can terror, the horrors of Fascism and Nazism, and America's "age of anxiety" in the incipient nuclear age, be given adequate expression in the visual arts? Many of these concerns also confronted existentialist theologians and philosophers. In this way Newman shared common interests with Tillich, the 'existentialist theologian of art.' The Abstract Expressionists were looking at Navaho sand paintings, Native American and African ritual masks, and the ideas and techniques of ritual in general. The outcomes of this exploration resulted in techniques like Jackson Pollock's 'drip paintings'; Picasso's use of African masks in his painting and sculpture; and extremely large size canvases, basic color selections and the use of simple mark-making to create Newman's mature paintings. The search for primitive, spiritual practices and symbols in

[1] Richard Shiff, "Introduction," in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews,* ed. John P. O'Neil (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), xiv.

[2] For a detailed discussion of the sublime see Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (New York: Routledge, 2017) 1-16.

the work of indigenous artists from around the world presages the ideas of the "spiritual but not religious" tradition of the early twenty-first century.

Abstract artists have long struggled with defining the subject matter of their art work. The sheer enjoyment of artists' materials, the enchantment of color, and the power of design often took the place of traditional subject matter for contemporary artists. Contemporary paintings were just paintings: usually oil or acrylic on stretch canvas. However, many abstract artists from early in the twentieth century, were asking what can be identified as spiritual, existential questions. They posed those questions and pondered answers through their paintings or sculpture.

Newman was not only a modern artist but also an art critic. He both created art and reflected in print on his role as an artist in the America of the mid-twentieth century. He also offered narrative descriptions of his paintings and what he intended them to mean. He was aware of the workings of the New York art world and he was knowledgeable about his place in the history of art. He was also aware of the interrelationship between the artist and the society in which the artist worked. Shiff writes that Newman balanced both the individualism of the artist-creator and the obligations that the artist had as a member of society, termed by Newman as an "artist citizen."

> Artists are extreme individualists, whereas citizenship entails working for the furtherance of the group. Newman was an individual who channeled the product of his isolated thought back into the flow of his society. He constituted a strike force of one dedicated to anarchist principles of independence; he battled against ignorance, foolishness, and corruption, especially in the New York art world he knew so well…Having created himself as well as his art, he lived the life of a free man—even as he passed from obscurity to renown. That freedom, coupled with a sense of terror and tragedy, was the subject of Newman's art.[3]

[3] Shiff, "Introduction," xxvi.

The enhanced sense of the individual and the individual's call to lead a genuine life echoes existentialism. For Newman, living a genuine artist's life takes on a spiritual aspect. An artist engages in constant practice, in this case creating visual art in a fashion similar to the way that a religious contemplative practices meditation. The artist, in addition, is also a responsible member of society who is ethically required to contribute to the good of society. She highlights the depths of social dysfunction and celebrates the individual and her free expression and experience. Celebrating this freedom of the individual artist implicitly confronts the violence, repression, and harm of a society that is given to disorder and dangerous political movements.

The Question of Abstract Religious Art

Through most of Christian history, religious art has been figurative. Until recently, Christian churches have not embraced abstract art as having a religious meaning. Laying out the argument against abstract art, Stratford indicates that the Christian Church generally understands that since Jesus was incarnated in the world, religious art needs to focus on artistic depictions that are realistic and readily identifiable. However, Stratford sees a place for abstract religious art. "For while traditional Christian doctrine does locate Christ's incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection in historical time, it does not necessarily follow that realistic visual narrative can adequately express or contain these immense realities."[4]

[4] Linda Stratford, "Theological Imagination: The Paintings of Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman," *in God in the Modern Wing: Viewing Art with the Eyes of Faith*, eds. Cameron J. Anderson and G. Walter Hansen (Downers Grove, IL.: IVP Academic, 2021) 89-91.

History of the Stations of the Cross

In the history of Christianity, the visual arts have typically represented the Stations of the Cross as an expression of fourteen events that tradition sees as part of Christ's Passion and Crucifixion. The original stations were a substitute for Christians making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and walking the Via Dolorosa. With the Stations of the Cross available in so many churches, that experience was available to all. In many liturgical churches making the Stations of the Cross is still a regular practice. Often a group of the faithful is led to each of the fourteen images that represent each station. A brief scriptural reading is offered at each stop on the way, accompanied by a prayer and a verse of the hymn *Stabat Mater* is sung.[5] Stratford finds that in contrast to the usual imagery and symbolism used in the Stations of the Cross:

> Newman's Stations operate both inside and outside of this framework, and his title selection plays fast and loose with the viewer's anticipation of recognizable imagery. Surprisingly, Newman employed an entirely abstract 'nonobjective' visual vocabulary to complete the series; no symbolism, realistic rendering nor illusionistic space is offered. Rather, Newman's Stations consists of black paint applied to raw canvas in repeated vertical bands.[6]

I contest Stratford's idea that Newman's *Stations* do not contain symbolism. Contemporary abstract artists' understanding of symbolism includes basic geometric shapes, the symbolism of the size of an artwork in relationship to the size of a human being, as well as the symbolic meaning of various artists' materials such as raw, unprimed canvas and black acrylic paint applied in large vertical strips of varying widths.

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[5] The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of The Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, "The Way of the Cross," in *The Book of Occasional Services: Conforming to General Convention 2022* (New York: Church Publishing, 2022), 52-87.

[6] Stratford, "Theological Imagination." 97.

All communicate meaning and function symbolically. In the instance of the *Stations,* Newman himself has discussed how he created them and what their meaning is to him.

While looking at Newman's *Stations of the Cross*, we are dealing with a contemporary artist. Like Newman, many contemporary artists are familiar with, and participate in, the philosophy of art and art criticism. With these critical and discerning perspectives artists like Newman reflect upon their own works. Over the span of his life, Newman contributed to these fields and there is a standard monograph with dozens of his writings on contemporary art, including his reflections on his own art.[7] Were Tillich alive today and engaging theologically he would likely look at these artists statements and reflections as well as the titles of art works. These are important, for example, in appreciating and understanding a work of art like Newman's *Stations*. These writings are relatively new artifacts of the art world which supplement actual works of art. These writings are creative works of the artist and can serve as an extension of the visual art work. Artists' statements and monographs of contemporary visual artists discussing their own works, as well as the works of fellow artists, become important contextual source material to use when looking theologically at contemporary art.

Newman's *Stations:* Lemma Sabachthani

Next I look at Newman's series of fourteen paintings called the *Stations of the Cross*. This is an interesting topic for Newman, who was Jewish, to delve into. Newman discusses this crucial late work in an interview with Hess. Newman is familiar with the

[7] Barnett Newman, *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews,* ed. John P. O'Neil (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

traditional Stations of the Cross and he takes pains to distinguish the uniqueness of his work and how this series of paintings differs from the traditional Stations. For Newman, Christ's Passion relates to the crucifixion, which he interprets as universal suffering. From the perspective that all human beings suffer physically, Newman discusses his understanding of the Aramaic phrase 'Lama Sabachthani' which Jesus, according to the Gospels, cries near the very end of his passion. Newman states:

> I was trying to call attention to that part of the Passion which I have always felt was ignored and which has always affected me. That was the cry 'Lama Sabachthani,' which I don't think was a complaint, but which Jesus makes. I was always struck by the paradox that of those who actually persecuted him and crucified him, he says to God, 'Forgive them, for they know not what they do,' but to God, who is projected as his father, he says, 'What's the idea?' This to me is a very strange paradox. In doing this work I began to feel that my paintings were making that kind of a statement about the cry, and so I thought if I could do fourteen of them I would have a series of paintings that would in some way point to that cry. That's why I call them that….I only concentrated on that one issue. This is what the paintings meant to me—the cry—and so I ignored the actual anecdotes of the walk…[8]

Newman underscores the way that he understands his series the *Stations* and the paradox that he finds in the gospel text: the torment that was inflicted upon Jesus during the Crucifixion by the Roman soldiers and the paradoxical cry to God the Father to forgive his tormentors is tethered to his question: My God, why have you forsaken me? Through the multi-year process of painting the fourteen large canvases that make up Newman's *Stations*, Newman visually explores this paradox in the process of painting. In his interview and artist's statement,[9] Newman reflects on his creation of this series of

[8] Newman, *Barnett Newman*, 276-277.

[9] Newman, *Barnett Newman,* 276-277.

paintings. Newman's process of working through a series of paintings, with the same theme over a number of years, is an example of the way that a visual artist engages with a theological question.

The Stations contain only abstract imagery in the forms of vertical lines of paint of varying sizes applied to unprimed (raw) canvas. See figure 3.1. Stratford finds that art critics see Newman's technique as conveying meaning. "Buchwald asserts that 'Newman's series emptied the rhetoric of abstract expressionism of its pretense to fulness and self-referentiality…instead Stations employs the experience of vision and memory as loss…engagement with uncertainty.'"[10] This is accomplished through the preparatory processes and painting techniques that Newman employed. Another critic saw Newman's focus on Christ's words of abandonment from the cross as a lack of resolution of the overwhelming feeling of despair: "Christ's cry from the cross is properly regarded as a question rather than an assertion. Regarding the Passion, [critic] Terry Eagleton's

Figure 3.1: Barnett Newman, Third Station, 1960, oil on canvas, 78 1/8 in x 59 7/8 in, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

descriptive phrase, 'Jesus' engagingly human reluctance to die,' is especially poignant."[11] Newman focuses on a very human Jesus who experiences extreme pain at the end of his life and who, like other humans, struggles against death

[10] Linda Stratford. "Theological Imagination: The Paintings of Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman," *in God in the Modern Wing: Viewing Art with the Eyes of Faith*, eds. Cameron J. Anderson and G. Walter Hansen (Downers Grove, IL.: IVP Academic, 2021), 102.

[11] Stratford, "Theological Imagination," 102.

Newman's Artist's Materials and Meaning Making

The first major installation of Newman's *Stations* was at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Newman's earlier paintings had varied widely in size. The canvases in the *Stations* series were all of uniform size, approximately six foot high and five foot wide. As a result when the viewer walked around the series of the *Stations* paintings: "the position (of the viewer) to be taken in front of each human-scaled canvas was central, from which point the viewer could easily see the difference between one side of the work and the other. The regularity and repetition of the canvas [size]…highlighted differences between works and asked more of the viewer's memory."[12] As the viewer circumambulates the paintings a space is opened for posing questions of ultimate concern, for echoing the "why," expressing feelings of ultimate separation from the divine. As Godfrey states, Newman's paintings created a space where the viewer: "might not only be positioned to ask 'Lema Sabachthani?' (Why have you forsaken me?). The viewer—a tragic subject, aware of his situation and survival—might also be aware of his responsibility in respect to the cause of such despair."[13] This is a complex psychological and theological position in which to be. The situating of the *Stations* in the museum and the necessity to engage in contemplative

Figure 3.2: Barnett Newman, Tenth Station, 1965, magna on canvas, 78 in x 60 1/16 in, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

[12] Godfery, "Barnett Newman's "Stations of the Cross," 57.

[13] Godfery, "Barnett Newman's "Stations of the Cross," 59-60.

walking beside and gazing at the *Stations* can be viewed as part of the spiritual way that works of art function in a religious context.

Critical Responses

The power of the *Stations* is also enhanced by the painting choices: black vertical stripes or zips on a neutral background. Art critics see this technique as: "'the struggle to reproduce the stark and intense qualities of the cry.' The focus on Christ's cry as the subject of the radically minimalist canvases emphasizes the role of the series as a physical site that vocalizes lament, in this case as uttered by Christ."[14] The fact that the *Stations* is a series of paintings is also an important technical matter that contains meaning. Over Newman's long painting career, this is the only series that he painted. The repetition of forms, each slightly different from the other, "captures the dialogic attribute of a human cry. Gaps and stutters. Pauses and repetitions."[15] The series could be viewed as human lives, in which the elements of alienation from humankind and estrangement from the divine, is repeated over and over in every person's life historically as well as in the contemporary era. As a series of paintings arranged for exhibition in one room all together, the viewer moves around the gallery from canvas to canvas. Godfrey looks at the space taken up by the arranged paintings and the fact that the viewer is meant to walk around from the first to the fourteenth station, and finds that the viewer has entered sacred space. "In the 'Stations' exhibition the sense of place was achieved by surrounding the viewers with the work, both literally—as they looked forward, paintings were behind

[14] Stratford, "Theological Imagination," 102.

[15] Stratford, "Theological Imagination," 102.

them, too—and psychologically—the network of connections they constructed between the works gave the space unity."[16] In a ritual fashion, recalling practices of pilgrimage, contemplative walking and seeing, and the creation of sacred space, Newman's series of paintings, as they are arranged for viewing in a gallery, work together with the viewer-participants, the title of the series, and the possible memories of the participants, to ask questions of ultimate concern.

Arthur Danto, the art critic and philosopher, saw the 2002 Newman Retrospective in Philadelphia and commented on the *Stations*. In an essay on the retrospective published in the *Nation*, Danto wrote that the series was a masterpiece of abstract painting and simultaneously a highly spiritual artwork. Danto's essay shared his emotional reaction to seeing the *Stations* and discussed the way in which color use and formal materials combined to produce this highly regarded spiritual work of visual art. He wrote:

> The means [employed by Newman] could not be more simple: black and white paint on raw canvas which he used as a third color. The fourteen paintings do not map onto corresponding points on the road to Calvary. But Newman seems to use black to represent a profound change of state…The first several paintings have black as well as white stripes…Black entirely disappears in the Ninth Station, in which a stripe of white paint runs up to the left edge, and two thin parallel white stripes are placed near the right edge. The rest is raw canvas. The Tenth and Eleventh Stations resemble it, through the fact that they too are composed of white stripes placed on raw canvas. Then, all at once the Twelfth Station is dramatically black, as is the Thirteenth Station. And then, in the Fourteenth Station, black again abruptly disappears. There is a strip of raw canvas on the left, and the rest is white, as if Christ yielded up the ghost as St. Matthew narrates it. The work demonstrates how it is possible for essentially abstract painting to create a religious narrative.[17]

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[16] Mark Godfery, "Barnett Newman's 'Stations of the Cross' and the Memory of the Holocaust," in *Reconsidering Barnett Newman: A Symposium at the Philadelphia Museum of Art,* ed. Melissa Ho (Philadelphia: Publishing Department of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2002), 55

[17] Arthur C. Danto, "Barnett Newman and the Heroic Sublime," *The Nation,* June 17, 2002.

Danto's description offers a great example of the way in which the artist's choices in creating a visual work of art can serve to craft a spiritual narrative without the use of recognizable figuration usually associated with religious works of art. The artist's use of materials is thought-out and considered. It is as much a part of meaning-making as the inclusion of recognizable religious iconography.

The post-modern philosopher and theologian Mark C. Taylor, in his exhaustive examination of contemporary art, architecture and religion, engages with a number of artists and artworks including the *Stations.* Taylor demonstrates the way that Newman combines contemporary art-making techniques with philosophical questions. Newman's Fourteenth Station, also known as Entombment, is the final painting in the series. It offers the viewer hope after the extreme estrangement resulting from walking the stations. Noting the interplay of the ideas of presence and absence in contemporary twentieth century painters Malevich and Reinhardt, Taylor finds that in Newman's series: "Death becomes life for Newman. Beyond *The Stations of the Cross* lies the remarkable work Be II…[titled] *Resurrection*, [see figure 3.3 below] in which raw canvas is covered by a striking surface painted white and framed on the right by a slender black line and on the left by a border of bright cadmium red."[18] Taylor finds that this canvas expresses Newman's desire to resolve the ancient, persistent cry of "why?" in connection with human loss and separation from the divine.

[18] Taylor, *Disfiguring,* 88.

Figure 3.3: Barnett Newman, *Be II,* [Resurrection] 1961/1964, acrylic and oil on canvas, 78 in x 60 1/16 in, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Taylor also sees Newman as a painter who is enthralled with nothingness. Newman finds nothingness intriguing and requiring investigation. The *Stations* series is one of Newman's investigations of nothingness. Finding out the secret depths of nothingness is a difficult task. As Taylor states: "This task, however, was more difficult than it first appeared. 'Emptiness,' Newman discovered, 'is not that easy. The point is to produce it.'"[19] Taylor sees Newman's investigation of nothingness in making the canvases of the *Stations* in theological terms. He writes: "Newman followed in the footsteps of Aphaeretic negative theology. Through the process of abstraction, Newman also moved from volume to plane to line to point. The will-to-abstraction is a will-to-purity, which in turn is a will-to-immediacy."[20] Taylor underscores the philosophical and theological aspects of Newman's painting techniques and materials choices used in

[19] Taylor, *Disfiguring,* 88.

[20] Taylor, *Disfiguring,* 88.

making the *Stations* series and shows what appears to be fairly straight-forward painting techniques to encode deeper meanings.

In the catalogue that accompanied the first major exhibition of Newman's *Stations* at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1966, the critic Lawrence Alloway discusses the series in an essay. Because the paintings do not contain content that relates to the traditional iconography of the Stations of the Cross such as an illustration of Jesus carrying the cross, Alloway addresses the appropriateness of titling the series the *Stations* and naming each "Station One," "Station Two" and so on. Alloway underscores Newman's intentions in creating the series and not the traditional subject-matter represented:

> As Newman said, 'the artist's intention is what gives a specific thing form.' It is also to read the paintings with Christ's journey on the basis of an analogy between the event of the subject matter and the event of the painting series. The order of the paintings is in chronological order of their execution. Thus the subject matter is not only a source to Newman but, in addition, a parallel with aspects of his own life, so that the original event and the paintings are related like type and antetype in the Testaments.[21]

Newman himself suffered a serious heart attack in 1958[22] and his brother died in 1962.[23] At that time period Newman began creating the series of paintings that would later be titled the *Stations*. See figure 3.4 below.

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[21] Lawrence Alloway, "*The Stations of the Cross and the Subjects of the Artist*," in *Barnett Newman: The Stations of the Cross* Lema Sabachthani (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1966), 13.

[22] Barnett Newman *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews,* ed. John P. O'Neil (Berkeley: University of California Press, 19900, 189.

[23] "Chronology," The Barnett Newman Foundation, http://www.barnettnewman.org/artist/chronology.

Alloway reminds us that Newman has always seen visual art as having a non-functional origin. Newman saw visual creativity as the first behavior that marked the beginning of humankind and not the use of language. Alloway notes Newman wrote:

"'The God Image, not pottery, was the first manual act.' 'What is the explanation of the seemingly insane drive of man to be a painter and poet if it is not an act of defiance against man's fall and an assertion that he return to the Adam of the Garden of Eden?'"[24] Using striking theological language Newman situates visual

Figure 3.4: Barnett Newman, Thirteenth Station, 1965/66, acrylic on canvas, 78 1/16 in x 60 1/16 in, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

creativity as a key marker of what it means to be human as well as having a mythical-biblical dimension of Adam and the Garden of Eden. The artist-as-first-human rejects the divine exile from the Garden and through his or her artistic activity effects a return to Paradise. A very weighty task for Newman as well as any painter.

Another connection of Newman with theology is his use of the notion of the sublime to discuss his aims in creating art. Looking at a mid-twentieth century artist statement by Newman, Alloway finds that Newman discusses the way in which the idea of the sublime connects with the New York School of painters.[25] Alloway writes:

> [Newman] identified his own work with the sublime which, as an esthetic concept, condenses 'man's natural desire for the exalted.' Rudolf Otto, in *The Idea of the Holy* proposes the sublime as 'the most effective means of

[24] Alloway, "Stations," 13.

[25] The phrase the "New York School" is frequently used to refer to the Abstract Expressionists.

> representing the numinous'. Influenced by sublime esthetics, as well as by religious tradition, he insists 'magnitude', 'darkness', 'silence', 'emptiness' as sublime. These terms apply, with some precision, to aspects of Newman's work, whereas traditional formal analysis…does not.[26]

Newman, along with many of the other Abstract Expressionists, using very large format canvases, unique ways of applying paint to canvas, as well as the way in which these paintings were displayed in a gallery or museum show, underscore the importance of the idea of the sublime, a philosophical and theological term, in understanding Newman and many other mid-century American painters.

Alloway underscores the way in which the materials and techniques that Newman used in creating the *Stations* carry symbolic meaning. Using raw canvas, black and white paint applied in parallel segments of pure color, in varying widths, are simple yet impactful ways of communicating his key questions of ultimate concern. Alloway observes that, for example, in these paintings: "Different blacks occur from one painting to another and, sometimes, within one painting. Thus the series as a whole, for all its impression of austerity constitutes a highly nuanced system…"[27] For Alloway, Newman in the *Stations* centers not the divine but the human being at the center of Newman's cosmic drama: "…it is from man that art originates. Art is, therefore, centrifugal to man and not, as in [the work of the abstract painter] Mondrian, our glimpse of absolute truth existing separately from us."[28] Alloway highlights the way that Newman uses artistic materials to convey meaning and to ask significant religious questions in the *Stations*.

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[26] Alloway, "Stations," 14.

[27] Alloway, "Stations," 15-16.

[28] Alloway, "Stations," 16.

This chapter looked at the way that contemporary visual art, using the example of Barnett Newman, includes not only the finished artwork but also artist statements and other writings referencing the artwork. In Newman, as with other Abstract Expressionists, the search for the object of painting often yields spiritual questions of ultimate concern. That is, the paintings and sculptures of Newman and his circle often are religious artworks even though they lack the iconography of art that is typically designated as religious or spiritual. Newman, as demonstrated in the *Stations*, combines his skills in the craft of visual arts with his philosophical and theological expertise to produce abstract art that asks religious questions.

CHAPTER 4.

CONCLUSION

This final chapter summarizes my understanding of how Tillich might have interpreted the religious meaning of the *Stations.* I discuss how enriching Tillich's theology of art with insights from studio art practice, the written reflections of artists themselves, and critical reception could contribute to the important theological practice of engaging with culturally significant artworks from a religious perspective today.

As theologians engage with elements of culture, theology assumes an interdisciplinary perspective. In the case of Tillich and the theology of art, Tillich as well as today's theologians of art, work in multiple academic areas: theology, art history and the philosophy of art. Interdisciplinary work requires not only expertise in the field of theology but also to some degree in related fields such as art history. Art historians and philosophers expect theologians of art to incorporate the key understandings of those disciplines where relevant. All three fields are subject to constant progress and our knowledge must keep up with developments in all of those disciplines as they are relevant to the research in theology of art under discussion.

Expanded Notion of the Creation of Contemporary Art

Expanding Tillich's theology of contemporary art - particularly by exploring visual art in the more holistic way that art critics and some art historians do in their writings - is important in honoring the way in which today's art critics approach the discussion of works of art. This calls for an understanding of the working practices of

contemporary artists, art critics and art historians integrated with the practices of today's theologians of art. Throughout this thesis I have stressed that interpreting visual art can be complex, and that the interpreter must go beyond the physical visual artifact such as a painting or sculpture and look at the art-making process itself including the response to the art. The artist's materials that are chosen and the way the art work is structured contain meaning. The theologian of art benefits from knowledge of the studio practices of today's artists. I believe that the craft and design decisions of the visual artist also contribute to the meaning of a work of art. This is particularly the case with Newman's *Stations,* as discussed above. As the visual artist moves from the specifically religious subjects to more abstract representation of religious questions and ideas, technical decisions - such as the use of unprimed canvas or black paint - speak symbolically to the viewer who is aware of those choices.

Encounter with Abstract Art as a Spiritual Practice

Many of those who identify as spiritual or religious—Christians as well as others—look to incorporate visual imagery into their spiritual practices. The expansion of Tillich's theological investigations of contemporary visual art supports the development and growth of visual art used for spiritual, particularly contemplative, practices. Often characterized as Visio Divina, personal and group encounters with contemporary art that ask religious and spiritual questions is a growing practice. A number of publications exist on the topic. Some examples include Therese Kay's workbook *Meeting God*

Through Art: Visio Divina,[1] Jim Forrest's monograph *Praying with Icons,*[2] and Christophe Andre's *Looking at Mindfulness: 25 Ways to Live in the Moment Through Art.*[3] All of those suggest a contemplative, generally Christian, approach to art both classical and traditional. Those books, along with retreats and secular gallery and museum visits with a contemplative or religious focus concretely demonstrate ways in which the theology of art can be meaningfully applied to Christian or spiritual formation settings.

Tillich and Newman's *Stations*

The expanded theology of art that I argue for in this thesis underscores the continuing relevance of Tillich's work in the field today. By supplementing Tillich's theology of art with additional written materials that are part of art-making by contemporary artists, present-day theologians of art enrich their practice. The same is true for those members of religious communities and churches for whom museums, art galleries and studios are places for spiritual meaning-making and asking questions of ultimate concern.

Looking at Newman's series *Stations* through the lens of Tillich's theology of art requires us to use the method of correlation discussed earlier. This involves a two-part analysis. First, we look at the *Stations* and determine which questions of ultimate concern are being asked by Newman. Second, we look to religious tradition and see which

[1] Theresa Kay, *Meeting God through Art: Visio Divina* (New Haven, Independent Publishing, 2019).

[2] Jim Forest, *Praying with Icons* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Press, 2008).

[3] Christophe Andre, *Looking at Mindfulness: 25 Ways to Live in the Moment through Art* (New York: Blue Rider Press, 2015).

elements from Judaism and Christianity can be used in addressing the religious questions. Those elements include rituals, texts, sacred narratives, and theology.[4]

The series of paintings in Newman's *Stations* raise issues of ultimate concern regarding the estrangement of humankind and the divine as well as the separation of each individual from one another. Humans are also alienated from the other species that share our planet. That experience of estrangement was an enduring concern of Newman's which he explored in his series that took nearly a decade to complete. The context of Newman's questions of separation and alienation reflect his life experience during the twentieth century, a century which saw two World Wars, the rise of Nazism and Fascism, the holocaust, and the increasing individual alienation that arose from the necessities of capitalism and accompanying social relations. Established systems of meaning broke down and the usual responses did not function anymore. For Newman, the artist questions the divine: Why? Why is there suffering? Why is there so much death? Why is there war and social chaos? Why is there hopelessness? He repeats the question of "Why?" over and over. He does not abide facile answers.

From an artist's statement that Newman wrote for the exhibition of the *Stations* at the Guggenheim in New York in 1990,[5] he indicates that the existential question that is at

[4] American Academy of Religion, "Tillich's Theological Legacies," presentation with Harvey Cox, podcast audio, March 24, 2016. https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/american-academy-of-religion/id994565868?i=1000365442572. In his presentation Cox, from Harvard University, offered a concise description of Tillich's method of correlation and its concrete application in a 2015 panel discussion at the annual American Academy of Religion (AAR) conference. The panel discussion was later broadcast as an AAR podcast on March 24, 2016 from time-location 1:00 to 17:30 on the recording.

[5] Barnett Newman, *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neil (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 187-188.

the heart of this work is why human beings are born and why they suffer and die. He offers a text from Rabbinic wisdom literature, the *Pirke Abot*:

> The ones who are born are to die
> Against thy will art thou formed
> Against thy will art thou born
> Against thy will dost thou live
> Against thy will die [6]

Newman stresses the pain and suffering that make up human life, and the fact that human beings do not have the ability to assent to any of this: birth, suffering, and death are not willed but tragic events that happen to everyone.

In his artist's statement, Newman rejects the use of the *Stations* in the typical way as a series of anecdotes about the last hours of Jesus' life and death. For Newman, the *Stations* have a universal meaning about human life and suffering. Such suffering and finally death, is inherent in being human. If we use Tillich's second aspect of the method of correlation to look at the religious questions Newman, and presumably his audience, ask (particularly the question of "why?"), we turn to the theological, biblical and symbolic resources of both Judaism and Christianity. Some obvious sources are Psalm 22 and Rabbinic materials such as *Pirke Abot* cited above. Additional sources are the Passion narratives in the Gospels, as well as the large number of theological writings in Christianity and Judaism that address human suffering and death. This includes the reflections of Christian theologians throughout the millennia, as well as philosophical traditions that have impacted Christianity, such as Christian existentialism.

Drawing on biblical resources in the context of Newman's *Stations,* the opening lines of Psalm 22 are of key significance. In the background are the Passion Narratives

[6] Cited in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings*, 188

of the Gospels. The ritual of "making the stations," particularly during the Christian liturgical season of Lent, is also relevant. Newman emphasizes that he did not align his *Stations* with the traditional iconography and narrative of the stations, such as Jesus carrying his cross or Jesus dying on the cross and, after being taken down from the cross, placed in the arms of his anguished, devastated mother. Newman consciously articulates the importance of the words of Psalm 22: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? for understanding his *Stations.* I find repetition with variation - encoded in paint - in the canvases executed in relationship to a common theme, and the notion of litany with the refrain of the question "Why?" a major way in which the biblical and ritual elements of Judaism and Christianity come to play and respond to Newman's existential question. There is a paradox here: questions must be asked of the divine: Why life? Why suffering? Why death? There are no absolute answers, but there is questioning, the ritual of repetition in paint and canvas as well as in processing around the installation of the *Stations*. There is religious lament and narrative in the sacred scriptures. There is the Medieval and Modern history of the practice of walking the stations and asking the question that Newman asks. All of us who view and "take in" or "make" these *Stations* are spiritually changed.

Near the end of his life, Tillich was asked to give an address at the opening of new galleries at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Tillich had written his address, but was too ill to deliver it. His close friend and biographer, Wilhelm Pauck, read the address at the celebratory opening of the new galleries dedicated to contemporary art.

The address underscores the importance of experiencing works of art and the way in which they open up museum goers to the reality that is hidden in works of art.

Experiencing new art challenges our experience of the ordinary, and exposes viewers to new understandings of the universe. To have that experience, viewers must be willing to let go of their everyday assumptions. Tillich then writes of how this occurs with contemporary art. He states:

> [N]ew ways of disclosing the world have always aroused the resistance of those who wanted to stay securely with the familiar. This is not the fate of a particular style…it is the fate of every unfamiliar way of looking at the world…There is a rule in the life of the spirit, unfortunate but inescapable, 'the rule of the forgotten breakthrough.' The original creative breakthrough is the result of great tensions, inner struggles, victories and defeats, oscillations between hope and despair, overcoming of external resistance, and a final feeling of inner certainty, liberation and elation. But when it has happened and its creative power is visible, the unfamiliar slowly becomes part of the familiar, things from the depth become pieces of the surface; the new way, once opening up and revealing, has lost its power. What was breakthrough has become repetition.[7]

That quote from Tillich discusses change in art, and the role of creativity in fostering and supporting that change. I suggest a similar process of change and creativity occurs within theology and the theology of art. We begin viewing the new as unfamiliar and threatening. Over time, the unfamiliar begins to appear familiar, and the process of innovation and change repeats itself. Tillich gave us many theological tools to ask questions about the divine, about our ultimate concern and how visual art can aid us in asking those questions. Religious traditions offer us a variety of resources to dialogue about, think about, and ritualize those questions and concerns.

The work of the Abstract Expressionist artists offer the theologian of art a great deal of material for analysis. Many of these artists, outside of organized religion, asked questions about spirituality and how, for abstract artists, the spiritual is the subject matter

[7] Paul Tillich, "MOMA Address," in *On Art and Architecture,* ed. John Dillenberger and Jane Dillenberger (New York: Crossroad Press, 1989), 247-249.

of their work. To the extent that these artists recorded their ideas about their art making and studio practices, the theologian has a rich variety of visual and textual material to carry out their own analyses.

Newman is a particularly useful example of the artist-spiritual thinker. In this quote from his *Selected Writings,* he looks back over his career as a public artist, starting with his first major exhibition. His narrative shows the depth of the spiritual in his art making. He wrote:

> As for myself, I was asked in 1950 at the time of my first one-man show What is my own aesthetic? What can I offer as guidelines to my work? I said then that my entire aesthetic can be found in the Passover service. At the Passover seder, which was also Jesus's last meal, the blessing is always made to distinguish between the profane and the sacred: 'Blessed be thou, O Lord, who distinguishes between what is holy and what is not holy.' And when the Passover falls on the Sabbath, the Jew is caught in a dilemma between the holiness of the festival and the holiness of the Sabbath, which is holier than any other festival except the Day of Atonement; and his blessing then becomes, 'Blessed be thou, O Lord, who distinguishes between what is holy and what is holy.' That's the problem, the artistic problem, and I think, the true spiritual dimension.[8]

Newman closely ties the spiritual and the artistic together in discussing his painting practice. The distinction between sacred and profane, often in conflict in everyday life, falls away in his painting practice. Newman's text reminds me of the words of the mid- and late-twentieth century poet Allen Ginsberg, another Jewish artist, who states that "everything is holy" in his classic poem *Howl.*[9] Ginsburg himself also echoes the nineteenth century poet Walt Whitman's great celebration of life, and humanity in particular, in his poem "Song of Myself"[10] from his collection *Leaves of Grass*. We can

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[8] Newman, "Response to Matthews," Selected *Writings*, 290.

[9] Allen Ginsberg, "Footnote to Howl," *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights Books: 1956), 27-28.

[10] Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," *Complete Poems* (Penguin Books, New York: 2005), 63-124.

see Newman as part of a line of American artists who celebrated the divine in humanity and in the world, who blessed us with their art while, at the same time, questioning why there is so much senseless violence and death in the world; they asked the same question as Newman: "Why?"

Future Investigations

The theology of art has a great deal to offer the Christian church in terms of the investigation of the link between theology and culture. Theology of art, often in combination with contemplative practices, offers today's spiritual seekers new ways of asking and exploring spiritual questions, frequently outside of established religion. Tillich's development of the concept of religion as the human posture of asking questions of ultimate meaning, opens the use of Tillich's method of correlation to religious traditions outside of Christianity, thus giving an inter-religious dimension to his work.

One future direction for this work is the exploration of contemporary works of art in greater detail. An example is that of Jane Dillenberger, who published monographs on the religious art of the Pop artist Andy Warhol[11] and of Picasso's art work,[12] particularly Tillich's much-loved Guernica. Dillenberger looks extensively at a particular artists' work, the historical and political setting in which the artist created, the unique way that each artist approached religious questions, and the spiritual symbols that each artist employed. As an academic trained in art history and theology, as well as a close friend of

[11] Jane Dillenberger, *The Religious Art of Andy Warhol* (New York: Continuum Press, 2001) and Jane Daggett Dillenberger and John Handley, *The Religious Art of Pablo Picasso* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

[12] Dillenberger and Handley, *Pablo Picasso*, xi-xii.

Tillich, Dillengberger offers good examples of ways to extend the theology of art. Dillenberger also provides the example of a more extended investigation of the work of a single artist in religious terms in her monographs on Warhol and Picasso.

Mark C. Taylor, in his exhaustive volume on art and religion, offers detailed analyses of the intersection of art and theology in *Disfiguring.*[13] While Tillich situated his theological analysis of art within the context of existentialism, Taylor works within the paradigm of postmodernism and examines a wide range of contemporary artists and architects including: the painters Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Anselm Kiefer, and Jasper Johns; and the architects Mise van der Rohe and Robert Venturi.

I am particularly interested in theologically examining the Abstract Expressionists. These American painters and sculptors, whose main work was produced between the 1950's and 1970's, are unique in that their spiritual search is embedded within their creation of abstract art. During that period in American art, with the explosion of abstraction, artists were concerned with subject matter. There were two major responses to the question of subject matter: first, the painting or sculpting process itself was the subject matter; second, the "search for the spiritual" formed the subject matter. When the theologian of art looks at the work of Abstract Expressionists, she finds a group of artists who are asking questions about spirituality, who have studied the art making processes and works of non-Western cultures where spirituality plays an important role, and have often written extensively on their own and their colleagues' art. Those artists worked in the midst of what in the United States was, in W.H. Auden's

[13] Taylor, Disfiguring.

phrase, an "age of anxiety."[14] Tillich's existentialist theological framework[15] works particularly well in approaching these works in terms of the spiritual questions and questions of ultimate concern, that these artists asked.

Today, the theology of art is an interdisciplinary field. Practitioners need training in or knowledge of art criticism, art history and studio art, in addition to theology. Theologians of art need to share their work with congregants and non-specialists. There is a growing interest in the use of visual art in contemplative contexts as part of Christian or religious formation. The theology of art offers the church the opportunity to see the ways in which the visual arts contribute to human spiritual and psychological flourishing, and makes the church relevant to today's congregants - as well as those who profess a spiritual, but not religious, way of life.

[14] W.H. Auden, *The Age of Anxiety* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2011).

[15] Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be (*New Haven, Yale University Press, 2014). See Tillich's discussion of the West's "Age of Anxiety," in the chapter entitled "Being, Nonbeing, and Anxiety," 31-78.

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