

*Sightings 8/24/06*

Cell Phone Theology  
-- Brent A. Smith

I see applications for Paul Tillich's theology of culture in the most unusual places. His claim that "religion is the substance of culture [and] culture is the form of religion" reminds me to look for the deepest longings and "ultimate concerns" of human nature in contemporary cultural expressions, in the particularities and peculiarities of our time.

Take, for instance, our obsession with cell phones -- something that later generations will surely point to as a unique feature of the current era. Two recent cell phone commercials reveal expressions of deep longings in the present existential moment; they demonstrate, in unexpected ways, the desire for the assertion of individuality as well as the need for community as humans struggle to overcome isolation.

The first commercial is the series of ads for a provider that claims to offer subscribers the largest national network. In these ads, this network is literalized in a crowd of people always accompanying the phone-toting client. There is something soothing in this notion that wherever you go, and whatever "interference" you may encounter in your daily life, there will be a community to aid and support you, walking with you, even dropping out of the sky to be with you, as in the commercial. "You are not alone," the images in the ad suggest -- a prospect that just a few decades ago struck fear into the hearts of many. Now it speaks of a desire for stronger communal bonds in a time of increasing individual isolation.

The second commercial has a company's aging baby-boomer boss talking to his underling about his new cell phone package, one that gives him unlimited calling anywhere. "It's my way of sticking it to The Man," he boasts. His underling replies, "But you *are* The Man. So ... you're sticking it to yourself?" The boss says, "Maybe," apparently unfazed by living this obvious contradiction. During the 1960s, the "counter-culture" romantic ideal of authentic individuality was considered possible only over and against authoritarian conformity. Today, however, "sticking it to The Man" is announced even as it is revealed as an empty proposition.

Together, these two commercials attest both to a desire for and suspicion of community and communal authority. This ambivalence also finds expression and response in religious life. Not long ago, I read the Winter 2006 issue of the University of Chicago Divinity School's publication *Criterion*, which contains a wonderful remembrance of theologian Langdon Gilkey. One of his observations about American Fundamentalism stunned me with its insight into the kind of tensions and desires I'm talking about here:

"The reality of the world from which the liberals originated and which they resisted was the reality of communal authorities. The reality of our world is of community-less individuals, where the hope for community, family, and church is felt very deeply by the otherwise empty individual .... Fundamentalism grows in America because the natural and social communities of life have been threatened by economic, political, and social developments .... [Fundamentalist communities] have a saving character to them. There's no doubt that fundamentalism is a real community."

Gilkey does not dispute the ambivalent nature of American Fundamentalism, nor shy away from critiquing its excesses. But he also doesn't deny its balm for human yearnings to be connected, to overcome the anxiety resulting from the condition of human existence: separateness.

As a religionist in a liberal faith tradition (Unitarian Universalist), I find Gilkey's critique stinging and prophetic. My faith's historic resistance to authoritarian structures that inhibit the unfolding of the self into individuality on the one hand, and, on the other, its support for the individual standing in as direct a relationship with God as possible spoke with clarity to a former time. Now there is a greater need for social bonds, for the covenants that help bring people out of the isolation of the

self and into the redemptive possibilities of community.

Vestiges of authoritarian hegemony linger, however, even within the salvific possibilities of community. Free speech and the idea of individual civil liberties are being reconsidered nationally and internationally, and religion -- especially Christianity, Judaism, and Islam -- is a driving force in most instances, just as it is in answering this existential moment's most pressing human yearning for the bonds of mutual affection.

The present lesson in cell phone theology affirms this ambivalent feature of humanity: For better and sometimes for worse, the destiny and meaning of an individual's life are bound up with the destiny and meaning of a community and peoples of faith.

*For Further Reading:*

The Winter 2006 issue of *Criterion* containing Jeff B. Pool's interview with Langdon Gilkey, cited above, may be accessed at: <http://divinity.uchicago.edu/research/criterion/index.shtml>.

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The current Religion and Culture Web Forum features "Religious Identities of Latin American Immigrants in Chicago: Preliminary Findings from Field Research" by Andrea Althoff. To read this article, please visit: <http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/webforum/index.shtml>.