

**Title:** Spirituality, Bowen ...and God: Bowen Theory in Dialogue with Paul Tillich's Theology

**By:** William G. Ressler, M.Div., M.S.W.

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**Author Profile:** William G. Ressler is an ordained clergy in the United Church of Christ (UCC) and Co-Pastor of Trinity Community Church, UCC in Berwyn, Illinois. He is a Ph.D. student with a concentration in theology, ethics, and the human sciences focusing upon Bowen Theory and the theology of Paul Tillich at the Chicago Theological Seminary (CTS) in Chicago, Illinois. At CTS, during Fall 2005, he served as a teaching assistant under Robert L. Moore, Ph.D. in the advanced seminar, Paul Tillich on Theology, Ethics, and the Human Sciences. In 2006, Ressler will complete a two year Post-Graduate Certificate in Bowen Theory from the Center for Family Consultation (CFC) in Evanston, Illinois.

**Abstract:** Murray Bowen and Paul Tillich were great systematic thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Both utilized cultural reidentification through the use of language to redefine their disciplines, mental health and theology respectively. Bowen Theory examines human to human relationships while Tillich's theology extends the human experience towards the human and divine relationship. Both men recognized their systems could be modified or extended. Bowen suggested that factual data from the emotional system or differentiation of self might modify or extend Bowen Theory. This paper explores the similarities of Bowen Theory's differentiation of self and the existential possibilities found within the theology of Paul Tillich. This introductory work begins a dialogue for future research extending understandings of Bowen Theory, science, spirituality, and theology towards a more unified concept of humanity.

**Spirituality, Bowen ...and God**  
Bowen Theory in Dialogue with Paul Tillich's Theology

William G. Ressler

Spirituality, Bowen, and God – are three words not often found within the same sentence other than to suggest that there is little, if any, relation between Bowen Theory and the concepts of spirituality and God. Yet, we live in a time that seems to suggest that to understand a unified concept of the human one must bring spirituality and God (whatever and however those are defined, and they are defined in numerous ways) into the discussion. One method for bringing spirituality and God into discussion with Bowen Theory is to examine the similarities Bowen Theory has, or may not have, with theology.

Theology has for centuries attempted to discuss spirituality, God, and a host of other concepts. Theology, for purposes of this paper, is not a means for a specific doctrine or faith to impose “their God” onto others. Theology is not religion, spirituality, or God – but it speaks to all and more. Simply, theology is our individual God walk and God talk – the way each of us in our individual contexts understands and experiences (or not) “God” (however that is defined). Everyone has a God walk and God talk: Atheists, Jews, Christians, Moslems, Agnostics, and the list continues. In this way, we are all theologians.

This paper is based upon my theology, my God walk and God talk, which utilizes the language of Bowen Theory and the theology of Paul Tillich. Murray Bowen (1913-1990) and Paul Tillich (1886-1965) were two great 20<sup>th</sup> century systematic thinkers. Both men envisioned systems to define a unified concept of the human from their respective disciplines, the mental health field for Bowen and theology for Tillich. The following pages examine both systems by: defining the rationale for proposing this advanced work in Bowen Theory; reviewing

foundational aspects of Bowen Theory; reviewing foundational aspects of Paul Tillich's theology; examining the similarities between Bowen's scale of differentiation and Tillich's existential potentialities; and examining future research opportunities.

### **Rationale for Proposing This Advanced Work in Bowen Theory**

Bowen recognized his theory "might be modified or extended by factual data from the emotional system or from the differentiation of self."<sup>1</sup> Noting that an extension of theory could be achieved through "understanding how the function of a belief fits into the emotional system"<sup>2</sup> and recognizing that the function of subjectivity is key, not its content. The functional facts of the function of subjectivity could define observations that "repeat over and over in a predictable way."<sup>3</sup> As will be discussed, both Bowen and Tillich seem to offer similar understandings of differentiation of self, existence for Tillich, that repeat over and over in predictable ways.

### **Review of Bowen Theory**

Bowen Theory is a systematic framework, with a biological scientific foundation, that explores the tension between an individual and the relational togetherness of one's family system. Bowen's life work was an odyssey that began as an attempt to move Freudian theory towards the recognition as an accepted science. As new relationship patterns unfolded that could not be defined through Freudian concepts, Bowen explored the human through a comparative study of disciplines. Bowen was determined: on separating structure from function; focusing on the scientific physical structure of humanity; and working towards a unified concept of humanity. The premise for his work remained consistent, "the human is a passenger on planet

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Kerr and Murray Bowen, *Family Evaluation: An Approach Based on Bowen Theory*, (New York, New York: Norton & Company, 1988), 373.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Kerr, *Towards a Systems Concept of Supernatural Phenomena* in handout from *Wisdom of the Ages: A Conference on Spirituality and Bowen Theory* (South Mountain, PA: Joseph Carolin and the Western Pennsylvania Family Center, 1998), 15.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

earth and that sometime in the future the human can clarify the difference between *what the human is* from *what the human feels, imagines, and says*.”<sup>4</sup>

Bowen Theory is best known for eight concepts: triangles; differentiation of self; nuclear family emotional system; family projection process; multigenerational transmission process; emotional cutoff; sibling position; and, societal emotional process. These concepts provide a meaning system for defining the manifestations found within two life force systems, the relationship system and the emotional system. Relationship system manifestations are created by the balancing of emotional functionality and intellectual functionality, and the balance of solid self and the pseudo self. Emotional system manifestations are created by chronic anxiety and the integration of self, the emotional process and/or tension created by balancing togetherness and individuality.

Scale of Differentiation. Differentiation of self is the cornerstone of Bowen Theory. It is based upon a continuum and has no concept of normal nor does it define the absence or presence of symptoms. Barriers between diagnostic labels, neurosis, and normal are eliminated. Categories of mental capacity, social class, as well as cultural-ethnic differences are transcended and it is believed it may even apply to subhuman forms.

Differentiation of self is defined by the scale of differentiation, a scale from 0 to 100, that categorizes the differentiation of an individual. At lower levels on the scale a person is defined as poorly differentiated, being trapped within a world of feeling, while at the higher levels a person is defined as more differentiated, participating freely with others emotionally while not becoming fused in reactivity. The various levels of differentiation within the scale provide a means to understand the manifestations of life forces within an individual and their family system, namely: anxiety, tension of togetherness and individuality; emotional functionality and

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<sup>4</sup> Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 351-355.

intellectual functionality; and, solid and pseudo-self. Each life force manifests in particular ways and plays an important role in naming and defining the various levels of differentiation. Each level of differentiation, based upon the scale of differentiation, will be explored in contrast to Tillich's existential potentialities later in this paper.

### **Review of Paul Tillich's Theology**

Paul Tillich is recognized as one of the most influential systematic theologians dealing with culture and the human sciences in the twentieth century. Tillich worked from an understanding that theology and "Protestantism cannot be understood and formed except in relation to all realms of life"<sup>5</sup> including scientific facts that may, or may not, challenge its very existence. He recognized that Protestant theology could "without losing its Christian foundation, incorporate strictly scientific methods, a critical philosophy, a realistic understanding of men and society, and powerful ethical principles and motives."<sup>6</sup>

Tillich recognized much of religion and the expression of religion, which is culture, had become meaningless. He attempted to reinterpret the forms and symbols of Christianity so that their expressions would once again become powerful for contemporary life recognizing that "Christianity as it has developed in the Western world is only *one* of the preliminary and transitory expressions of the reality of the New Being in Christ. It is not the end."<sup>7</sup> Tillich's systematic theology offers our contemporary meaningless times, as it offered his time, a system of hope – a hope that is built upon an understanding that the individuals living on this fragile planet have a chance to achieve a transformed freedom from self destruction that values and respects the multidimensional unity of life.

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1948), viii.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Tillich, *My Search For Absolutes* (Simon and Schuster, 1967), 36.

<sup>7</sup> John P. Newport, *Paul Tillich: Makers of the Modern Theological Mind* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1984), 183.

Paul Tillich was always the theologian, creating a theology focused on healing, defined as salvation. Grace offers an increasing awareness, freedom, relatedness, and transcendency that is healing. The power of the new being minimizes despair and enhances understandings of revelatory events within life requiring an exploration of and witness to the revelatory event of Jesus the Christ. The Christ is the ultimate example of humanity in history in which one can begin to understand and participate in the perfect union between the polarities. All of existence is pointed towards and is a religious experience. Not the religious experience defined by a heteronomous hierarchy, but rather one that recognizes all existence is religious, that “religion is the substance of culture, culture is the expression of religion.”<sup>8</sup>

Four Potential Existential Dimensions. At the foundation of Tillich’s systematic theology is the understanding that the core ultimate concern in all humanity is active participation in and towards the New Being which can raise one out of existential despair. Meaning is created through an understanding of three ontological polarities (within individuals: individualization and participation, dynamics and form, and, freedom and destiny; and, within societal groups: autonomy and heteronomy, dynamics and form, and, freedom and destiny). These three sets of ontological polarities exist in differing manifestations within four dimensions: despair or disintegration; existential existence; essential potentiality; and ultimate unity. These dimensions explain relationships between individuals, individuals within societal groups, as well as the relationship with one’s ultimate concern (their “God”). The dimensional quality of these potentialities is very fluid in which one, individual or societal group, is always at the moment of potentiality towards non-being in finite freedom (despair or death) or moving towards a new being (courage that offers transformation). All humans have courage which is found deep within, the power to be, that reforms and can transform existence. Within societal groups, courage to

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<sup>8</sup> Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, xiii.

face despair is found within the individuals within the group. Each potential existential dimension will be explored in relation to the levels of Bowen Theory's scale of differentiation.

### **Similarities Between Bowen and Tillich**

Working from their different disciplines within the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both Bowen and Tillich developed similar maps of meaning for understanding human relationships (see Figure 1). Bowen developed a theory based upon a scientific methodology focused on human relationships while Tillich created a systematic theology focused on one's relationship with their ultimate concern as it is experienced in an individual life and in participation within societal groups, namely culture, religion, churches, and the broader society.

Both men attempted cultural reidentification<sup>9</sup> through the use of language in their respected fields: Bowen within the medical and mental health culture; and, Tillich within the theological "church" culture. Cultural reidentification often results in opposition and resistance which both men saw during their lives because of the systematic processes they defined. Today, both men's work is commonly used as significant contemporary systems of thought offering unique glimpses into understanding advanced methods of meaning making as well as emotional and relationship processes.

One of the major similarities between Bowen Theory and Tillich's theology is Bowen's life force of individuality and togetherness, which is the foundation for differentiation of self, and Tillich's ontological polarity of individualization and participation, which is a primary foundation for his entire theology. Bowen explored individuality with the togetherness of being part of a larger multigenerational family system. Tillich examined individualization and the relationship with larger societal groups, in particular churches, and an individual's and group's

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<sup>9</sup> For a more recent example of cultural reidentification on a larger societal level, see: Richard H. Roberts, *Religion, Theology and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 42.

relationship with the divine (often defined as Ultimate Concern, Spiritual Presence, and sometimes God). Tillich recognized these forces provide an understanding of the multidimensionality of life while Bowen recognized the life forces as the foundation of the family as an organism, consisting not of individual persons but “part of the emotional amalgam of the family and society.”<sup>10</sup>

#### *0-25 : Disintegration and Despair*

Bowen: 0 to 25 Scale. At low levels of differentiation, 0 to 25, a person is practically a no-self person, totally relationship orientated with an extremely strong togetherness force. Emotional functionality is extremely high with little if no intellectual functioning. The togetherness force forces one to seek love and approval at any cost, to keep harmony in the relationship while ignoring life-directed goals. Individuals withdraw or fight the relationship system they fail to gain approval from.

Tillich: Dimension of Disintegration and Despair. The lowest dimension is an anxious existence filled with anxiety moving one towards disintegration and despair. One lives in a state of ontological polarity disintegration resulting in anxiety of non-being at all levels of existence. Individualization and participation become aloneness and loneliness. Dynamics and form become resistance and rigidity. Freedom and destiny become anxiousness and doubt. Within societal groups, there is a reliance on forms creating a self-complacent autonomy resulting in inhuman heteronomy (high tension and cutoff or distancing). The autonomy and heteronomy become absolutism and exclusiveness. Dynamics and form is experienced as repression and profanization. Freedom and destiny becomes suppression and emptiness.

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<sup>10</sup> Murray Bowen, *Forward in The Family Life Cycle: A Framework for Family* edited by Carter, Elizabeth and Monica McGoldrick (New York, NY: Gardner Press, Inc., 1980), xvi.

### *26-50 : Dimension of Existential Existence*

Bowen: 26 to 50 Scale. At moderate levels of differentiation, 26 to 50, the individual is guided by the emotional system but is more flexible with more intellectual functioning. Much energy goes into being loved and loving while attempting to seek approval from others – the need for togetherness is high and self esteem is dependent on others approval. The pseudo-self is strong and a solid self is lacking. “They are in a lifelong quest for the ideal relationship with emotional closeness to others and direct, open communication of feelings. In their overt emotional dependence on others, they are sensitized to reading the moods, expressions, and postures of the other, and to responding openly with direct expression of feeling or impulsive action.”<sup>11</sup>

Tillich: Dimension of Existential Existence. The dimension of existential existence is a constant balancing of polarities, it is the dimension where most of us exist. We are torn between favoring anxiety or courage, resulting in a disintegration or integration of our polarities. We are torn between balancing our need for individualization and need for participation, our dynamics and our form, our desire for freedom and the limits imposed by our destiny. Within social groups, the individuals within the group struggle with the tension of individual autonomy and societal heteronomy resulting in a disintegration towards chaos or an integration towards theonomy, a new entity in a new creation in a new reality.

### *51-75 : Dimension of Potential Essentiality*

Bowen: 51 to 75 Scale. At moderate to good levels of differentiation, 51 to 75, individuals can function as a cooperative team because there is enough basic differentiation between emotional functionality and intellectual functionality. At this level, the intellect is no longer a pretend intellect relying on the emotional system. There is more of a solid self able to balance

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<sup>11</sup> Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (New York, NY: Jason Aronson, 1978), 368.

togetherness and individuality in order to follow independent life goals. Anxiety can be calmed when it arises. Individuals live more satisfying emotional lives and are freer within the emotional systems they participate. They utilize logical reasoning to extricate themselves from emotional events when necessary.

Tillich: Dimension of Potential Essentiality. The dimension of potential essentiality is a movement towards peace. It is recognized as an integration towards a new being in a new creation in a new reality that lives in a balanced existence. Individualization and participation become a sense of solitude and a mature relatedness. Dynamics and form become growth with self creativity and re-formed forms. Freedom and destiny become directed definiteness and meaning filled understandings of destiny. In social groups, this dimension is an integration towards a Spiritual community, a theonomous unity. The essential social group is not a religious community but the anticipatory representation of new reality, a new being as community. Autonomy and heteronomy become self transcending and universal inclusiveness. Dynamics and form transform into form transcendence and form affirmation. Freedom and destiny become a balance of tradition and a reformation destiny.

#### *76-100 : Dimension of Ultimate Unity*

Bowen: 76 to 100 Scale. Bowen could not substantiate this level through direct observation of families as he had the other three dimensions, therefore he hypothesized a “projection of known characteristics from the other profiles. Complete ‘differentiation’ is practically and theoretically impossible but I wanted the upper profile to complete the total concept.”<sup>12</sup> The upper quarter of the scale of differentiation, 76 to 100, is divided to those who are 85 to 95 and those who are 95 to 100. The 95 to 100 category is essentially impossible and primarily hypothetical. The 85 to 95 category is rare and was never seen by Bowen in his clinical

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 405.

work. Hypothetically, a person in the 85 to 95 range would be a very highly differentiated person who would be inner directed. They are a well-defined self that is principle-orientated and goal-directed. They can contain emotional functioning within the boundaries of the self while being free to move in any relationship system without a need for the other that could impair their functioning.

They are always sure of their beliefs and convictions but are never dogmatic or fixed in thinking. They can hear and evaluate the viewpoints of others and discard old belief in favor of new. They are sufficiently secure within themselves that functioning is not affected by either praise or criticism from others. They can respect the self and the identity of another without becoming critical or becoming emotionally involved in trying to modify the life course of another. They assume total responsibility for self and are sure of their responsibility for family and society. They are realistically aware of their dependence on their fellow man.<sup>13</sup>

Tillich: Dimension of Ultimate Unity. In the dimension of ultimate unity, one experiences ecstasy and joy. Ultimate unity is an integration of polarities that is found within revelatory moments. Individualization and participation transform into a centered personality and recognition of the multidimensionality of life. Dynamics and form become ultimate vitality and transformed forms. Freedom and destiny become freedom from self destruction and a limiting, directed destiny. In social groups, ecstasy and joy is experienced in an unambiguous yet fragmentary creation. An essential relationship between religion and culture is achieved where reality is encountered in its totality thereby eliminating the need for religious symbols and religious acts which are no longer necessary since every act is an act of self-transcendence. This Spiritual community is defined through five elements: 1) an ecstatic character; 2) faith releasing state of total incertitude; 3) self surrendering love; 4) a sense of ultimate reunion; and, 5)

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 164.

openness and drive.<sup>14</sup>

It is difficult to imagine a group functioning within this dimension for it requires a dynamic essence where Spiritual integration is found within community that looks at and lives within the larger, objective view of life. The group would be in a state of full joy, fully balancing the emotional and intellectual within a full solid sense of purpose. A group functioning in this dimension would require all individuals within the group to be functioning, as Bowen described, with “complete selflessness in which “doing for others” replaces selfish personal goals. Jesus Christ has been a model for total selflessness. ... A well differentiated self has to get beyond the selfish promotion of self. One has always to be aware of “the other.”<sup>15</sup>

Current Research on Upper Level. Current scientific research suggests this dimension is not simply hypothetical or theoretically impossible but possibly scientific fact. Modern neurological scientific research, defined as “‘neurotheology’ the study of the neurobiology of religion and spirituality,”<sup>16</sup> suggests that:

Transcendent states, as we’ve seen, exist along a continuum of progressively higher levels of unitary being that ultimately leads to the point at which unity becomes absolute. In the state of absolute unity, there are not competing versions of the truth; there is only truth itself, so conflicting beliefs, or conflicts of any kind for that matter, are not even possible.<sup>17</sup>

Using high-tech brain imaging techniques on meditating Buddhists and Franciscan nuns at prayer, the “palpable presence of God is not a delusion or a manifestation of wishful thinking

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology Volume 3: Life and the Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 151.

<sup>15</sup> Bowen quoted by Richardson, in: Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 183.

<sup>16</sup> Sharon Begley, *Religion And The Brain: In The Field of ‘Neurotheology,’ Scientists Seek the Biological Basis of Spirituality. Is God All In Our Heads?* (Newsweek, May 7, 2001), 53.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Newbert, Eugene D’Aquilli, and Vince Rause, *Why God Won’t Go Away: Brain Science & The Biology of Belief*, (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 2001), 163.

but rather a chain of neurological events that can be objectively observed, recorded, and actually photographed.”<sup>18</sup>

### **Future Research Opportunities**

Recognizing and examining the similarities between the systematic systems of Bowen and Tillich could offer Bowen theorists, family therapists, and systematic, pastoral, practical theologians a broader unified concept of humanity. With such a framework: Bowen theorists may be able to better understand brain functioning in relation to broader societal processes (relationships between humans and/or other species) and spirituality (relationship with the divine) thereby providing a means to address the similarities of all life while also recognizing the unique aspects, function, and social location of each species; family therapists could further their research and understandings of culture, gender, race, and other significant life cycle issues recognizing the multidimensional unity of their work towards dismantling oppressive systems that have empowered a few while silencing the rest; and, pastoral theologians are provided the opportunity for advancing practical theological understandings of bridging theory and practice around concepts of mutuality, love, and justice.

This initial work also offers an introductory foundation for a larger theo-scientific framework incorporating Bowen Theory and Paul Tillich’s theology which could include: a process of development and social location extending the understanding of multigenerational developmental processes; a model of ritualistic cultural expressions to explore life cycle rituals in relation to differentiation; and, further work towards a new concept for Bowen Theory, Regeneration. Regeneration could offer significant opportunities for the extension of Bowen Theory in relation to contemporary issues of spirituality. Regeneration defines the factual shifts that have occurred within multigenerational systems and that occur within individuals as

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., Inside Jacket Cover.

differentiation moves towards the Dimension of Spirituality. Through Regeneration therapists could explore the emotional, relational, and meaning making impact of these shifts through an understanding of scientific theory, bridging science with spirituality and theology – bringing spirituality, Bowen ...and God into dialogue.

And remember, each of us is the dialogue – we are all theologians with a unique God walk and God talk – we are each the manifestation of our unique multigenerational family system right here and right now. The dialogue between Bowen and Tillich offers each of us a means to explore and witness to that which is our Ultimate Concern.

The End ...or is it really only the beginning?

**Figure 1: Potential Similarities Between Bowen Theory and Tillich’s Theology**

<b>Bowen Theory</b>	<b>Tillich Theology</b>
<b>Life Forces.....Ontological Polarities &amp; Understandings</b>	
<b>Emotional System.....</b>	
Anxiety	Anxiety & Joy
Individuality & Togetherness	Individualization & Participation (Ontological Polarity)
<b>Relationship System.....</b>	
Emotional Functioning & Intellectual Functioning	—
Solid Self & Pseudo Self	Spiritual Self & human spirit
<b>Meaning System.....</b>	
—	Dynamics & Form (Ontological Polarity)
—	Freedom & Destiny (Ontological Polarity)
<b>Concepts</b>	
<b>Systematic Framework</b>	
Differentiation of Self	Vertical Nature of Reality
Differentiation of Self Scale: 76—100 51-75 26—50 0—25	4 Potentialities: Ultimate Unity Essence Existence Disintegration / Despair
Developmental Process	Finite Freedom and Development of self
Multigenerational Transmission Process Nuclear Family Emotional System Family Projection Process	Space, Time, Substance, & Causality Anxiety from tension of Ontological Polarities
Societal Emotional Process	Societal Nature: Autonomous, Heteronomous, Theonomous
<b>Future Work.....</b>	
Unidisease (Kerr) <sup>19</sup>	Regeneration (Bowen/Tillich Bridge)
<b>Therapeutic Model.....Healing - Salvation</b>	
Co-investigate emotional environment of relationships	Holistic understanding of healing through grace
Minimize anxiety, increase differentiation	Increase self awareness, freedom, relatedness, & and transcendency
Move towards more solid self	Move towards New Being

<sup>19</sup> Michael Kerr, *A Proposed New Concept in Bowen Family Systems Theory: The Unidisease Model* handouts from a presentation (Annual Family Symposium, Washington, DC: The Bowen Center, November 5, 2005).

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