

Paul Tillich's Schizophrenia

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Paul Tillich once confided to his secretary at Harvard that he was a schizophrenic. In this article, the author, who is also a schizophrenic, discusses symptoms of schizophrenia in Tillich's biography and theology. Tillich had always insisted that his theology was one of the *kairos*. By hiding his theological thought behind an arcane Greek word, Tillich dissimulated his own messiah complex. On several occasions, Tillich describes a mystical schizophrenic hallucination with such accuracy that it is obvious to those who have had similar visions that he was speaking from personal experience. This article raises unanswerable questions about the relationships between religious revelation, mystical ecstasy and schizophrenia.

Keywords: schizophrenia, mysticism, messiah complex

Introduction

Throughout his thirty-two year career in American universities, Paul Tillich had to hide the fact that he was a schizophrenic so that people would not lose interest in his theology. In the twenty-first century, mental illness should no longer be a taboo subject among university intellectuals. We should be able to see that the experience of schizophrenic mysticism adds a new and deeper dimension to our understanding of God and His various revelations throughout history.

Theology and Schizophrenia

Many Christians consider Paul Tillich (1886-1965) to be "the greatest theologian since Augustine" (Cali, 1996, p. 19). I started reading Tillich in 1963, at the age of seventeen, one month after I had my first schizophrenic hallucination. I immediately realized that he and I shared a terrible, ineffable secret, that of suffering from the same type of mental illness, which I would characterize as being mystical schizophrenia or schizophrenic mysticism. I had been driven insane by a psychiatrist at the Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire who had been given the task of curing me of my homosexuality.

At the tender age of seventeen, I found it uncannily easy to understand Tillich's theology, whereas "many theology students at the Divinity School had been so intimidated by reports of his abstruse profundities, they refrained from tackling his writings until at least the second year of seminary" (Cali, 1996, pp. 59-60). My facility in understanding Tillich can only be attributed to my schizophrenia. It takes one schizophrenic to recognize and understand another.

I have just recently discovered, with immense satisfaction and amazement that Tillich actually confided to his secretary at Harvard that he knew that he was schizophrenic. Grace Calí writes:

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"You know, Paulus," I said hesitantly, "I've often wondered how you have kept from becoming schizophrenic."

At my words, he bolted upright in his chair. "But that's just it—I am."

A shocked note of certainty in his voice jolted me. The word I had used in almost a casual fashion came alive and hung in midair between us, charging the room with a crackling intensity. We both knew that he never used psychiatric terms loosely. (Cali, 1996, p. 20)

Tillich later told his secretary, "I am two persons. And the one has nothing to do with the other" (Cali, 1996, p. 59). It is well known that schizophrenics have two personalities, often called a split personality, and that some have multiple personalities.

The purpose of this article is to discover and analyze possible symptoms of schizophrenia in Tillich's biography and theology. If he was indeed a schizophrenic during the course of his complex life, then one would expect to see repercussions of his schizophrenia in his theology.

Tillich's biography reveals that he was hospitalized for a psychosis from March 31 until April 7, 1918, at the German military hospital at Guise in France. The diagnosis given was that of "*einen nervlichen Schwächeanfall*" (Schüßler, 1997, p. 14). The English translation of this German expression is "a sudden feeling of weakness" in the *Harper Collins German-English Dictionary*. However, a sudden feeling of weakness is not serious enough to require spending a week in a mental hospital. Psychiatrists have never been able to agree among themselves as to diagnoses of mental illnesses. Andrew Scull, an expert on the history of mental illness, claims: "Psychiatrists' inability to agree among themselves on a diagnosis threatened to make them a laughing-stock" (Scull, 2015, p. 407). I shall attempt to demonstrate that it would probably be more accurate to give the diagnosis of schizophrenia to the mental illness that forced Tillich to be hospitalized.

After reading Tillich for over fifty years, I am convinced that Tillich had a beatific vision during his mental illness and that this vision would today be diagnosed as being a schizophrenic hallucination. He describes this experience with an accuracy that is reserved to those who have known it personally. He says, for example, "When the soul leaves the body, it must pass over many spheres where daemonic forces rule; and only the soul that knows the right and powerful word can continue its way to the ultimate depth of the Divine Ground" (Tillich, 1948, p. 61). Tillich refers to a beatific vision again when he affirms, "The revelation of God is at the same time the veiling of God. God can reveal Himself only by remaining veiled" (Tillich, 1948, p. 89). He continues by distinguishing between a prophetic ecstasy and a mystical ecstasy,

For even in the greatest ecstasy, a prophet does not forget the social group to which he belongs, and its unclean character which he cannot lose. Consequently, the prophetic ecstasy, as opposed to the mystical ecstasy, is never an end in itself, but rather the means of receiving the divine commands which are to be preached to the people. (Tillich, 1948, p. 90)

One has the right to wonder how Tillich knows that the Old Testament prophets were in a state of ecstasy during their beatific visions, since the word *ecstasy* never occurs in the Bible. The only conclusion to which one can come is that Tillich is describing an experience that he has had himself. This mystical or prophetic ecstasy in which the mystic or prophet actually sees the Kingdom of God, with God being veiled in unapproachable light behind a multitude of angels, is today called a schizophrenic hallucination. When I describe mystical schizophrenic phenomena, I have the great privilege of speaking from personal experience.

In 1920, two years after being hospitalized for his mental illness, Tillich announced that his theology was one of the *kairos*. In the *New Testament*, the word *καιρος* is used to refer to the propitious moment in history

for the return of Christ on earth¹ (Mark 13: 33). Although the *kairos* is the central element of Tillich's theology, Tillich scholars have been negligent in not interpreting it in the context of the *Greek New Testament*. The arrival of the Son of Man, also called the Second Coming of Christ, the Parousia, the Messiah or the Lord's Anointed, has been an essential element of Christian mythology for the past two thousand years. It has been a part of Jewish prophecy even longer. Intellectuals today tend not to believe in God, especially in the God of traditional Christian churches, largely because God never seems to do anything. If my hypothesis is correct, Tillich wanted to help God with His eschatological promise. It is not altogether impossible that Tillich believed that the Nazi barbarism of his native country represented the Abomination of Desolation prophesied by the prophet Daniel, which is expected to happen immediately before the return of Christ in His glory (Matthew, 24: 15).²

If my hypothesis is correct, Tillich had a second, secret personality, that of the Second Coming of Christ. Instead of saying in German or English that he was the Messiah, he said in Greek that now is the appropriate moment in history for the appearance of the Messiah, the *kairos* of the Gospel, but it amounts to the same thing. Today's psychiatrists would probably say that Tillich had a massive messiah complex.

What, according to traditional theology, is the Messiah expected to do? He should judge the living and the dead, humble the rich, exalt the poor and establish peace on earth. Tillich never tired of judging the living and the dead. His books are full of judgments on all kinds of people. For example, he says, while judging the dead, that the American Revolution was "a just war" (Tillich, 1963, p. 387) an idea that I as a Canadian pacifist find absurd. An example of his judging the living is his opinion that Salvador Dali's painting of the Last Supper was "junk" (Cali, 1996, p. 27). His German religious socialism aimed precisely at humbling the rich and exalting the poor, but he died before he could witness the total failure of Marxist-inspired socialism throughout the world.

In the last sermon of his life, which he gave at Harvard on March 28, 1965, he says: "We hope for the fulfillment of our work, often against hope, because it is already in us as vision and driving force" (Tillich, 1990, p. 186). One can only wonder what he had in mind when he refers to the fulfillment of his work. Did he hope that future generations would recognize his second, secret personality, that of the Second Coming of Christ, as corresponding to some mysterious theological higher truth? Did he really think that Christian intellectuals today have faith in the fundamental promise of the *New Testament*, that Christ will actually return to this vale of tears to set things right, or, to use the words of John Milton, "till one greater Man restore us and regain the blissful seat" (1957)?

One Tillich scholar has recently declared Tillich to be "a prophet" (Parrella, 2015, p. 17). What kind of timidity causes him to refrain from recognizing Tillich as being the Messiah? I am certain that this is what he would have liked.

So much of Tillich's theology consists of hermetic arcana that can only be understood correctly by schizophrenics. Tillich says the same thing about Jesus: "In the New Testament, men possessed by demons are said to know more about Jesus than those who are normal" (Tillich, 1973, p. 338). To be "possessed by demons" means in today's language to be psychotic. Two things are remarkable in this sentence. First, it implies that Tillich considered Jesus to be psychotic. Secondly, I cannot find anywhere in the New Testament

¹ A book in *The King James Version of the Bible* (2004).

² A book in *The King James Version of the Bible* (2004).

where this idea is stated. I have read the *New Testament* more than once, and yet I cannot recall ever reading such an observation. Why did Tillich feel it necessary to make such a claim, when he appears to be unable to tell us where in the *New Testament* this statement is to be found? Just as I could understand Tillich because of my schizophrenia, he thought that he could understand Jesus better than most people because of his own schizophrenia.

The relationship between mental illness and religious revelation is as old as the *Old Testament*, where we find these words: "The prophet is a fool, the spiritual man is mad" (Hosea, 9:7).³ The Hebrew word "to prophesy" also means "to rave, to act like one beside oneself, or to behave in an uncontrolled manner" (Scull, 2015, p. 18). Karl Jaspers attempts to prove that the prophet Ezekiel was a schizophrenic (Jaspers, 1951, pp. 95-106).

I am convinced of the following. If people believe that God is the supreme truth, the eternal truth, the ultimate truth that transcends all other truths, the truth that makes all other realities seem ephemeral and of finite importance, then it is because schizophrenics have told them that this is so. Atheists or humanists, on the other hand, simply refuse to worship other people's hallucinations.

Conclusion

If understood with sympathy and intelligence, Tillich's experience of schizophrenia should be seen as adding a new profundity to his thought. His prophetic and mystical ecstasies are consistent with similar experiences that have occurred throughout the three thousand year history of the Judeo-Christian prophetic tradition.

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³ A book in *The King James Version of the Bible* (2004).