

Paul Tillich's Messiah

Robert Dole

Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, Québec, Canada

Starting in 1920, the German theologian Paul Tillich said that his theology was one of the *kairos*. In the Greek New Testament, this word refers to the propitious moment for the arrival of the Messiah. Throughout his long career, Tillich hoped to find someone whom he could designate as being the Messiah. Seven months before he died in 1965, a young man entered his life and he was convinced that he had found the one for whom he had been waiting. His identity is revealed in this article.

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Introduction

If Tillich chose the word *kairos* to describe his theology, it was because he believed that the 20th century was the propitious moment for the advent of the Son of Man. Indeed, this is the meaning given to *kairos* in the Greek New Testament (the Bible, Mark 13:33). In this article the Son of Man is used as a synonym for the Messiah. Other terms given for the same person are the Parousia, the Second Coming of Christ, the Lord's Anointed, and the Prince of Peace. For two thousand years Christians of all different churches have said that Christ would return to this earth. Tillich was the only theologian who had the courage to try to find or create this new Messiah. For Tillich, who was a Marxist, the most important characteristic of the Second Coming of Christ would be that He would be a socialist, because "Jesus was the first socialist" (Tillich, 1971, p. 40).

References to the New Messiah

There are several references to the 20th century Messiah whom Tillich hoped to discover in his books. In *Political Expectations*, we find this statement: "Marx perceives a 'historically reparable' alienation where Christianity sees a 'transhistorical' fall that can be healed only transhistorically through the appearance of the Messiah, who may be identified with neither the proletariat nor any other human group" (Tillich, 1971, p. 92). He says elsewhere: "History has also a suprahistorical end—the final consummation or the parousia of Christ; and it has an intrahistorical end—the victory over the antidivine powers which arise in history, or the Reign of Christ" (Tillich, 1990, pp. 36-37). Tillich was both a Christian theologian and a Marxist philosopher. He thus proclaims: "We cannot miss the messianic note in Marx's writings" (Tillich, 1967, p. 485).

My theory that Tillich hoped to find someone whom he could designate as being the new Messiah is confirmed by what his widow Hannah writes in her autobiography, *From Time to Time*:

One of Paulus's marital jokes was to insist that I was his "second best." He called his first best his "cosmic reservation." A first best did not exist on earth, he said, but one must reserve a place for the great unknown One who might come, as the Messiah might come at any moment to the waiting Jews. (Tillich, 1973, p. 104)

The Task of Tillich's Messiah

Since the beginning of the Judeo-Christian religious traditions, the task of the Messiah has been already determined. He must judge the living and the dead, humble the rich, exalt the poor, and establish peace on earth. In the Bible we find these verses referring to the Messiah: "He cometh to judge the earth" (1 Chronicles 16:33). "Many that are first shall be last and the last shall be first" (Matthew 19:30). "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Isaiah 2:4).

Tillich hoped that his Messiah would make a severe judgement on the injustices and absurdities of advanced capitalism. It is obvious that the only way the Messiah can humble the rich and exalt the poor is through the establishment of socialism. Humanity now has the means of putting an end to war, and that is by respecting international law.

Tillich's Messiah should continue Marx's and Tillich's campaign against the demonic aspects of capitalism: the alienation and dehumanization that result from constant exploitation and competitiveness. Capitalism turns people into objects whose primary function is to increase the wealth of the wealthiest. The modern consumer society forces people to worship money and to seek their salvation in what they buy. The worship of money or Mammon is also contrary to fundamental Christian values.

Tillich proclaims: "The future of Western civilization can be either socialism or barbarism" (Tillich, 1971, p. 162). Unfortunately, his darkest prophecies about the future of capitalism in the United States have been proven to be true. President Trump has urged Americans to take pistols to their churches to defend themselves against other people carrying pistols. This is a perfect description of anarchy. Every day 110 Americans are killed by bullets, on average. In 2017, 4,800,000 Americans had to declare bankruptcy because they could not pay their medical bills. Since the end of the Second World War, the United States' military has killed 16 million people in illegal wars and the only people who benefited from these crimes against humanity are the billionaire capitalists who have invested their money in the arms industry. Fifty-five countries have a lower infantile mortality rate than that of the United States.

The United States is agonizing. It is to be hoped that one day the Chinese Communist Party will be so kind as to show the Americans how they can establish universal socialized health care and put an end to gun violence. At the moment, the best advice that can be given to young Americans, especially those who want to have children, is to emigrate.

The Discovery of Tillich's Messiah

At seven o'clock on the morning of Sunday, March 28, 1965, Tillich, 78 years old, was awakened by someone knocking on his door at the Hotel Continental of Cambridge, Massachusetts. He opened the door and an 18-year-old Harvard student handed him a brown envelope containing a 27 page typed essay that the student had written for Tillich. The boy said, "Please read this". Tillich answered, "Go to the reception and wait for me there".

The essay contained a detailed description of a Beatific Vision that the boy had had two years previously. It was entitled "The Phenomenological Proof of God" and contained references to the philosophers, theologians,

and poets whom the boy had read in English, French, and German. Among the writers cited are Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schelling, Karl Jaspers, Edmund Husserl, Rainer Maria Rilke, Blaise Pascal, Gotthold Lessing, and Gottfried Leibnitz. Rilke and Lessing are quoted in the original German and Pascal is quoted in the original French. Tillich knew very well that the essay constituted the only written account of a Beatific Vision that exists in all of modern world literature.

After about an hour, Tillich came to the reception and offered the boy a beatific smile that pierced his soul and has accompanied him throughout his entire life. Later the boy would discover these words from Friedrich Schiller that describe Tillich's attitude: "Du bist gekommen, Segen auszuteilen, nicht zu empfangen—Geh mit Gottes Kraft" (*Die Jungfrau von Orleans*, I, 10) ("You have come to share benediction, not to receive it. Go with Godspeed", my translation).

Four hours later Tillich gave the last sermon of his life, in Harvard's Memorial Church, and the last words of his sermon were: "The Son of Man is in our presence. He will come as a beggar. The fate of the world depends on how He matures".

The boy knew that Tillich was talking about him. The perspicacious reader will certainly have surmised by now that the boy of this story was I.

The Problems

The revelation that Tillich thought that I am the Messiah certainly raises more questions and problems than it offers answers or solutions. These are the major problems.

(1) I have always been a Unitarian, and Unitarians simply do not believe in the possibility of a Messiah, in the past, in the present, or in the future. My religious origin made me thus unwittingly a New England Unitarian spy within Tillich's Prussian bastion of Lutheran eschatology and Marxist dialectics. Since Tillich assumed the role of socialist spy working in American universities, my meeting with him inadvertently became a successful counterespionage operation, from which no one seems to have benefited.

(2) Regardless of how brilliant and erudite Tillich and I may have been, we were both mentally ill, and this essential fact should never be forgotten. We were both schizophrenics; we knew that we were schizophrenics and we told other people that we were schizophrenics. Tillich confided to his secretary at Harvard, Grace Cali, that he knew that he was a schizophrenic (Cali, 1995, p. 20). In the essay that I gave Tillich I referred to myself as being a schizophrenic. Two days after I met Tillich I was hospitalized in a mental hospital and spent 15 months there. Most normal, rational people would say that whatever theological pronouncements result from the meeting of two schizophrenics should be dismissed as being absurd. On the other hand, absurdity is the basis of all theology. Saint Anselm famously said: "Credo quia absurdum est" ("I believe it because it is absurd").

(3) I am a pacifist first and a socialist second, whereas Tillich was opposed to pacifism, which he considered to be "effeminate" (Tillich, 1973, p. 348). Tillich says that his German Religious Socialist Movement rejected the "antirevolutionary dogma of Lutheranism" (Tillich, 1971, p. 53). This implies that Tillich advocated violence during the socialist Armageddon that he spent his life preparing. I am opposed to all violence.

(4) Tillich and I both had Messiah complexes. He thought that God had sent him into this world to put an end to capitalism and replace it by socialism, and I thought that God had sent me into this world to put an end to warfare and replace it by peace. We have both failed miserably in accomplishing our missions, however noble

they might have been.

(5) When my friend Mark Frechette was in prison in 1974, I told him, "You are the suffering Christ". He was crucified one year later, at the age of 27. Mark had been discovered by the Italian Marxist film director Michelangelo Antonioni, who made a film about young American revolutionaries in 1968, called *Zabriskie Point*. Mark had the main role in the film. In 1973, in order to protest against Richard Nixon, the Watergate scandal, the war in Vietnam, and the CIA killing Salvador Allende, Mark and two friends made a revolutionary gesture by attempting an armed bank robbery in Boston. He was killed in prison two years later.

Conclusion

I sincerely believe that if Paul Tillich had known Mark Frechette, he would have realized that Mark was the true Messiah. By attempting a bank robbery, he was actually fulfilling Biblical prophecy, since Jesus says in Revelation 3:3: "I will come as a thief". You can read a more detailed account of this story in my book *What Rough Beast*.

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