The Concept of *Kairos* in Paul Tillich’s Theology and in the Greek New Testament

Robert Dole

(The following is a translation from French to English by the author of his article entitled *Le Concept de kairos dans la théologie de Paul Tillich et dans le Nouveau Testament grec*, which was published in *La Revue d’histoire et de philosophie religieuses*, vol. 77, no. 3, pp. 301-307, 1997.)

Starting in 1920, Paul Tillich said that his theology was one of the *kairos.* For Tillich, the *kairos* counted as the central message of his work. It was precisely to emphasize the importance of the *kairos* that he founded “the *kairos* circle,” a group of theologians, philosophers and socialists that would later adopt the name of *Deutsche Religiöse Sozialistische Bewegung*, the German Religious Socialist Movement.

If Tillich chose a Greek word to describe his thought, it was because he wanted to make a reference to the theology of the Greek New Testament. Indeed, he does exactly that when speaking of “the concept of *kairos* in the New Testament” (1977, p. 145). The goal of the present article is to examine the concept of *kairos* in the New Testament and in Tillich’s theology so as to discover possible similarities between the two. Tillich could have used a German expression, such as “*angemessene Zeit,”* which would have been the modern equivalent of “*angenehme Zeit”* in Bach’s work. According to my hypothesis, Tillich preferred a Greek word precisely because he wanted the deep sense of his religious faith to remain hermetic.

In Greek, the word *kairos* means “the propitious moment.” It is opposed to *chronos,* which refers to time as seen as a continuum. The word *kairos* appears sixty-six times in the Greek New Testament. However, there is only one interpretation that interested Tillich, that of the propitious moment for the arrival of the Son of Man, which is expressed thus in the Gospel of Mark 13:33: “Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time (*kairos)* is.” The return of Christ constitutes one of the most important elements of the New Testament. It is mentioned in each of the four gospels as well as in Revelation, which ends with these words: “Come, Lord Jesus” (22:20). According to the Gospel of Matthew, Christian faith is characterized especially by faith in the return of Christ. The true Christian is one who keeps his or her faith in the return of Christ, despite all the existential difficulties and the scepticism of others. In referring to the return of Christ, Matthew says: “But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved” (24:13).

The greatest mystery of the Christian religion has always been its eschatology, meaning the return of Christ as Messiah, as predicted in Isaiah 40:5: “And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.” The *kairos*, the propitious moment for the advent of the Messiah, who should judge the nations, establish a reign of peace, exalt the poor and humble the rich, has not yet happened. The greatest challenge of Christian theologians has been to recognize Christ when He returns. Today intellectuals do not believe in the possibility of the return of Christ because they do not believe in God. They do not believe in God because God has not kept His greatest promise, that of sending a Messiah. It is a vicious circle, the Gordian knot of theology. If my hypothesis is correct, Tillich wanted to untie the knot.

In Tillich’s theology, the word *kairos* means the propitious moment for the intervention of the eternal within the temporal, in other words the appropriate time for the return of Christ as saviour of the world. Tillich states: “The New Testament has called this moment the ‘fulfilment of time,’ in Greek, *kairos*… It is the moment when the Kingdom of God is ‘at hand’” (1963, p. 369). The choice of the word *kairos* to indicate the most important element of his theology should not be understood to refer just to the advent of Christ two thousand years ago, but rather to indicate Tillich’s faith in His imminent return. Here again, the use of the word *kairos* is consistent with its use in the Greek New Testament, since this term is never applied in the Bible to the birth of Jesus, but only for the triumphant arrival of the Son of Man at a moment in history chosen by God.

According to Tillich, history should have two *kairoi*: that of Jesus and that of the future Son of Man. He says: “The symbol of the Second Coming of Christ corroborates the Resurrection by placing the Christian in a period between the *kairoi*, the times in which the eternal breaks into the temporal, between an ‘already’ and a ‘not yet,’ and subjects him to the infinite tensions of this situation in personal and in historical existence” (1957, p. 164).

If my hypothesis, eccentric as it may be, is correct, Tillich wanted to discover or rather create a twentieth century Christ. So as not to appear to be a crank, he was obliged to hide the secret meaning of his theology by his hermetic use of the word *kairos*. There exist in Tillich’s works, however, three references to the contemporary Christ of Whom Tillich was dreaming.

The first reference to the Tillichian Messiah is in his book *Kirche und Kultur* (1924) where Tillich speaks of his vision of a theonomous society in which “The Church and society are destined to become one” (Béland, p. 153). Tillich admits that he cannot fulfill his dream all alone. All that he can do is to prepare the way for someone who will do it for him: “We cannot do what is decisive. What we can do is to prepare the way. It was always thus and will remain always thus for any epoch that aspires to have a revelation” (Béland, p. 154). The revelation of which Tillich dreams here is obviously one which God will give to someone else. A Christian cannot read this passage without thinking of the words of Matthew 3:3: “Prepare ye the way of the Lord.” If Tillich insists that “it was always thus,” it is precisely because he wanted to allude to the role that John the Baptist plays in relation to Jesus, as prophesied by Isaiah.

The second reference to the new Tillichian Christ is in *The Socialist Decision* (1933):

“Socialism’s adopting of the bourgeois interpretation of human nature and its consequent exclusion of the ‘center’ from its image of the human has caused, for example, *the underestimation of the charismatic personality*, i.e. the person who carries power of conviction by virtue of his being, his spiritual-vital center, quite apart from his rational formation or standing” (1977, p. 74). If my theory is correct, this person would be a faithful follower of Tillich’s, he would dedicate his life to continuing Tillich’s work after his death, he would work to renew both Christianity and socialism, he would assure the survival of the German Religious Socialist Movement, and he would create the “theonomous” culture of which Tillich spoke throughout his career.

The third reference to the Tillichian Messiah is to be found in his widow Hannah Tillich’s autobiography (1973). She says: “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 of 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” (1973, p. 104). Tillich would play the role of John the Baptist for his great unknown One, by “making straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Isaiah 40:3).

We should insist on the pain that Tillich felt during his lifetime because of the role that his native country was playing in world history. Tillich was profoundly German and at the same time profoundly anti-Nazi. He was a Marxist socialist who was obliged to spend the last thirty-two years of his life in the United States, the universal champion of unrestrained capitalism. It can be said without fear of contradiction that he played the role of a prophet in relationship to Germany since his heart was broken by the barbarism that was prevalent there. It is possible that Tillich believed that the Third Reich represented the “abomination of desolation” predicted by the prophet Daniel, which the Gospel says should precede the arrival of the Messiah (Matthew 24:15). If Tillich succeeded with his *kairos*, the German people would give to the history of the twentieth century not only Adolf Hitler but also a new Christ.

As a socialist, Tillich would have hoped that his “Great Unknown One” would be an American who would denounce American capitalism with the same fervour with which Tillich denounced Nazism. “No prophet is accepted in his own country” (Luke 4:24). In the last sermon of his life, which he gave at Harvard University on March 28, 1965, Tillich said: “We hope for the fulfillment of our work, often against hope, because it is already in us as vision and driving force” (1990, p. 186). It is obvious that Tillich wanted his work to be fulfilled after his death. Six months after giving this sermon, Tillich died and was buried in New Harmony, Indiana. The symbolical force of the name of this village speaks for itself. Tillich hoped until the end that his Great Unknown One would establish a new harmony on earth.

If my interpretation of *kairos* is correct, Tillich wanted to create a socialist apocalypse; he characterizes it thus: “The *Kairos*, the fulfillment of time, which as a boundary concept between religion and socialism has been the hallmark of German religious socialism” (1973, p. 338). He wanted to untie the Gordian knot of Christian eschatology and at the same time succeed in meeting the challenge of any Marxist philosopher, since Marx said quite clearly: “Until now philosophers have attempted to interpret the world. Now they must change the world.”

We have the right to wonder in what way Tillich’s Great Unknown One would be different from normal people. I believe that we have to look for the answer in the concept of “rational formation” to which Tillich refers in *The Socialist Decision* (1977, p. 74). His rational formation would be different from those of normal people. He would be someone whom certain psychiatrists would diagnose as being mentally ill. Tillich follows the example of Erasmus in making a praise of folly: “In the New Testament, men possessed by demons are said to know more about Jesus than those who are normal” (1973, p. 338). The question of the relation between mental illness and religious fervour is as old as western civilization. The Greeks and Hebrews of antiquity sincerely believed that supreme truths are revealed through mental illness. In the Old Testament, we find these words: “The prophet is a fool, the spiritual man is mad” (Hosea 9:7). In the New Testament it is said: “Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad” (Acts 26:24). The Romans also appreciated the creative value of madness. Seneca says, for example: *“Nullum magnum ingenium sine mixtura dementiae fuit” (De Tranquuilitate Animi* I, 15): “There is no great genius without madness”.

The theologian Abraham Heshel compares prophets to psychotics thus: “The mind of the prophet, like the mind of a psychotic, seems to live in a realm different from the world which most of us inhabit” (1962, p. 188). What distinguishes a prophet from a psychotic is the ability of the prophet to go between the world of divine inspiration and the world of normal people as opposed to the psychotic who is unable to leave his unreal world.

Christian mystics have all known what John of the Cross calls *“la noche oscura del alma”,* “the dark night of the soul,” which would certainly be diagnosed as a paranoid psychosis by today’s psychiatrists. Indeed, Evelyn Underhill, the great expert on Christian mystics, says that what distinguishes mystics from normal people is precisely the fact that mystics worship their own hallucinations whereas normal people worship their neighbours’ hallucinations (1990, p. 10).

Tillich was certainly aware of the question of the relation between mental illness and religious revelation. It is equally certain that he was familiar with the controversy created by certain nineteenth century German psychiatrists who thought that Jesus was a paranoid schizophrenic who probably struggled with a homosexual tendency. Albert Schweitzer, in his book *The Psychiatric Study of Jesus* rejects the theories of these psychiatrists and claims that mental illness is a cultural phenomenon and that psychiatrists of one culture cannot judge what might constitute a mental illness in another culture. Be that as it may, it is certain that if someone said Jesus’s words today in public, he would immediately be confined to a mental hospital. Tillich often refers to the mental illness of prophets and mystics without directly using this diagnosis. In order to avoid this thorny if not blasphemous question, he hides his thoughts by using the hermetic word “demonic.”

Today those who have a direct and dazzling contact with God are the schizophrenics. We are unable to say if it was ever different. If I insist on the relation between madness and religion, it is not to denigrate religion but rather to praise madness. We live in an epoch in which psychiatrists and psychologists have replaced priests and theologians in the metaphysical and spiritual lives of ordinary people. If a psychiatrist says that a type of behaviour or a way of thinking is a neurosis or a psychosis, the patient feels just as guilty as a believer once did when a priest accused him or her of a venial or mortal sin. In wanting people to be normal, psychologists do all that they can to suppress all originality and genius. It is certain that, in our scientific period, there is no room for religious people, whether they be messiahs, prophets, mystics or simple believers.

Paul Tillich was not the only intellectual of our era who believed that the return of Christ would take place in the twentieth century. The other was the Irish Protestant poet William Butler Yeats. Here is his poem entitled *The Second Coming.*

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;

Surely the Second Coming is at hand.

The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out

When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*

Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert

A shape with lion body and the head of a man,

A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,

Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it

Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.

The darkness drops again; but now I know

That twenty centuries of stony sleep

Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,

Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

It remains to be known if the author of this article shares the idea of Tillich and Yeats that Christ will return in the twentieth century. The answer is negative, alas. I am a Unitarian. I was born a Unitarian and I shall die a Unitarian. Unitarians do not believe in the return of Christ, just as they do not believe in the virgin birth, the miracles, or the resurrection of the body of Christ. Many Unitarians do not even believe that Jesus was the Christ, probably because he was not born in Boston and did not study at Harvard. Others would agree with Ralph Waldo Emerson, a Unitarian philosopher, who thought that every man should be his own Messiah and that every woman should have been a man. For us, religion does not consist in the effort to believe the unbelievable but rather in the effort, even more difficult, to lead a good life, a life worthy of those who have been created in the image of God.

BIBLLIOGRAPHY

BÉLAND, Jean-Pierre. 1995. *Finitude essentielle et aliénation existentielle dans l’oeuvre de Paul Tillich.* Montréal: Bellarmin*.*

HESHEL, Abraham. 1962. *The Prophets*. Volume II. New York: Harper and Row.

SCHWEITZER, Albert. 1948. *The Psychiatric Study of Jesus.* Boston: Beacon Press.

TILLICH, Hannah. 1973. *From Time to Time.* New York: Stein and Day.

TILLICH, Paul. 1957. *Systematic Theology*. Volume II. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

TILLICH, Paul. 1963. *Systematic Theology.* Volume III. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

TILLICH, Paul. 1973. *The Boundaries of Our Being.* London: Collins.

TILLICH, Paul. 1977. *The Socialist Decision.* New York: Harper and Row. (The orginal German version, *Die sozialistische Entscheidung,* was published by Alfred Protte in Potsdam in 1933.)

TILLICH, Paul. 1990. *Theology of Peace*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press.

UNDERHILL, Evelyn. 1990. *Mysticism.* New York: Doubleday.