

Tillich's Kairos and its Trajectory*

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ABSTRACT

The author remember, first of all, the history of the concept of Kairos in Tillich's thought, since the "Kairos Circle" of religious Socialists in Berlin, until its retelling in the Systematic Theology. Then it searches show how churches have tried to update the concept, to apply it to various political situations: the pursuit of peace at the end of the Viet Nam war (1980), the fight to end Apartheid in South Africa (1986), the liberation movement in Central America (1988), the critique of neoliberalism in Europe (1989) and the liberation of Palestine (2009), showing always relations to the thought of Paul Tillich.

Keywords: Paul Tillich, *Kairos*, politics, liberation movements.

O KAIROS DE TILLICH E SUA TRAJETÓRIA

RESUMO

O autor lembre, em primeiro lugar, a história do conceito de *Kairos* no pensamento de Tillich, desde o "Círculo Kairos" de socialistas religiosos em Berlim, até a sua releitura na Teologia Sistemática. Em seguida, ele procura mostrar como igrejas tentaram atualizar o conceito, ao aplica-lo a diversas situações políticas: a busca da paz no fim da guerra do Vietnã (1980), a luta pelo fim do "Apartheid" na África do Sul (1986), o movimento de libertação na América central (1988), a crítica do neoliberalismo na Europa (1989) e a libertação da Palestina (2009), mostrando sempre a correspondência com o pensamento de Paul Tillich.

Palavras-chave: Paul Tillich, *Kairos*, política, movimentos de libertação.

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Paul Tillich's intimate discussion group in Berlin after World War I came to bear the name of the Kairos Circle. The term *Kairos* has continued through history to be affirmed by circles of Christian believers and their allies who have wanted to radically change their societies.

Within the Kairos Circle, it was a resolution to the debate between activists and determinists who insisted that history would carry its own solutions forward. Action was needed, but it had to be in tune with the properties of the contemporary history, which were open to radical change. Theologically, Tillich meant the term to bear the weight of the intersection of eternity and historical action. For him it meant in 1922 that history was ripe for the fulfillment of the ideas of the religious socialists. By 1932, he understood religion would have to radically change to be open to socialism, and socialism would have to radically change to be open to the ultimate claims of religion.

In Berlin in 1951, Tillich would say that the religious socialist ideas of the interwar period were basically correct. He expressed the *kairos* as the Kingdom of God that was both transcendent and historical. In history, the Kingdom of God was only fragmentarily present. He thought the concept of the Kingdom of God pointed to fulfillment only in its vertical dimension. Still it encouraged historical action in its immanent dimension. In his personal opinion, the *kairos* lay ahead only in the distant future. He was speaking in Germany under American and Russian domination, but in decolonization and the civil rights movement elsewhere in the world, moments of *kairos* were producing significant breakthroughs in mixtures of socialism, religion, and liberalism. Maybe the 1922 statement was more utopian than he admitted. The 1951 statement was unnecessarily confined to the context of the cold war, but, as he said in the *Systematic Theology* of 1963, the concept of *kairos* had a life of its own. There he admits the term was partly, and only partly, confirmed in the period of its emergence. His definition was: "Its original meaning—the right time, the time in which something can be done—must be contrasted with *chronos*, measured time or clock time. The former is qualitative, the later quantitative."¹ He argues that its use in the *New Testament* shows it to reveal the maturity of time

¹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* III (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 369.

in which the Kingdom of God may manifest itself. But he notes the power to resist the Kingdom can also be magnified at the same time. He correctly notes the Biblical attribution of the term to both Jesus and Paul, and mistakenly to John the Baptist.²

Tillich notes the term has other Greek uses than the New Testament use, and he does not enter into any particular exegesis of the term. Lon Weaver has developed the exegesis of different connotations to the term in the *New Testament* and noted its rare usage in the *Septuagint*.³ Weaver notes how Tillich was partially wrong in his expectations of *kairos*, and he believes Tillich attached positive moral meaning to the term that it did not deserve. Tillich is careful in the *Systematic Theology* to note the concept can be used destructively, and, in sentences reminiscent of his quarrel with Emmanuel Hirsch, he mentions the demonic distortion of the idea by the Nazis. The apprehension of *kairoi* is in vision and involves risk as one or a group may be mistaken. An examination of the trajectory of the concept risks judgments on whether a group was correct in its perception of the *kairos* or not. For Tillich a correct perception required correlation to the reality of the Christ in Jesus, including the willingness to sacrifice the self for the cause. Prideful, self-serving movements could not be expressing an authentic *kairos*. Finally, he said the true *Kairos* is unique and the *kairoi* or lesser expressions of historical fulfillment are rare. History often proceeds without glimpses of *kairos*.

Contemporary use of the term different from Tillich's includes the consort of singers from the Holy Cross Monastery (a young adult retreat center), many prison ministries, a publishing house, a Canadian relief agency of the churches, a technical agency, and studies in rhetoric that find the term being used by various ancient Greek authorities, including Protagoras and Hippocrates. An alternative connotation of the term is associated with Kairos, the youngest of Zeus's offspring and the god of opportunity. This apparently led to financial consulting firms taking the

² Matthew Lon Weaver, *Religious Internationalism* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2010), 291.

³ He categorizes 88 uses of the term in the New Testament and finds 55 illustrations relevant to Tillich's use of the term. *Ibid.*, 289. I think he misjudges Tillich when he criticizes Tillich for attaching a moral approval on the occasion of its use. *Ibid.*, 292. Tillich is aware of its moral ambiguity and says so clearly in *Systematic Theology* III, 371.

title. The inquiry of these reflections focuses on six theological groups encouraging action fit to the times.

Kairos and Peacemaking

The Presbyterian General Assembly may have been the earliest Church body to pick up the symbol of Kairos and make it part of its official teaching. In 1980, in a period of national discouragement over the retreat from Vietnam, Russian assertiveness, the revolution in Iran, and economic stagnation, this Church saw an opportunity for a new emphasis upon peacemaking. It launched a program of peacemaking, sponsored an all church special offering to support it; it hired additional staff to work on the issues to change the consciousness of the church to equip its members to engage in peacemaking, and to witness for peace to the nation. Its founding policy, *Peacemaking: The Believer's Calling*, called Presbyterians to claim their vocation as peacemakers and announced peacemaking as a priority for the church. It recognized the structural disorders of the world, which left 1.2 billion people near starvation and wasted its treasure in the arms stampede. It decried the 450 billion dollar world expenditure for arms and called for new thinking to replace the old reliance on national interest, security, and power in a more interrelated world. It estimated that one-third of that armament cost was born by the United States. The statement was important as it challenged individuals and the church to respond, change, and create an institution within the church dedicated to peacemaking. Significant votes in local congregations chose to support the program and the offering, and maybe one-third of approximately 11,000 congregations chose to support the new effort. The language of *kairos* was used three times in the document to assert that this was the time for the church to act decisively with new thinking, new budget, and new actions.

The nation, however, thought otherwise, entering into a period of arms build-up and assertive militancy under the Reagan administration. Chief of Army Chaplains, a Presbyterian, resigned in fear that the new military was planning to fight a nuclear war rather than merely adequately to deter one. The Church officially considered a policy of

resistance to the increasing militarism, but by 1988, it concluded to work against the militarism with renewed use of ordinary means—meaning witness and politics—rather than to engage as a church officially in resistance. Still individual members were to be supported in their acts of resistance. Gradually the sole super-power role of the U.S. turned into more arms exports, less foreign aid, sporadic attempts to relieve world suffering and, after 9/11, more wars. The Peacemaking Program declined more rapidly than the overall church and while it presently exists, it remains anemic. The most recent General Assembly of 2010 called for a review of the program and its foundation in *Peacemaking: the Believer's Calling*. In retrospect, although *kairos* was an important concept in the Church policy, the Church probably misjudged 1980 as a time of peacemaking significance since the country went the other way. The writing of the task force, though adopted by General Assembly, was not shared by the Church as a whole. Polls showed that the majority of Presbyterians voted Republican. Tillich's religious socialism was ignored and the Presbyterian Church advocated religious welfare-capitalism.

South Africa Kairos

Kairos is more central in the *Kairos Document* of South Africa than it was in the Presbyterian document. In the 1986 edition, it is defined as “Kairos is the Greek word that is used in the Bible to designate a special moment of time when God visits his people to offer them a unique opportunity for repentance and conversion for change and decisive action.”⁴ The nation was in crisis and many were being killed in the movement to end apartheid. The document was drafted in a theological center, referred to many groups for amendment, published, criticized, and then in 1986, republished in a second edition. It recognized the divisions in the country and within the church. It criticized the theologies of state and church then dominant in the country and called for a prophetic theology that was very specific as to

4 “The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church” in Robert MacAfee Brown, *Kairos: Three Prophetic Challenges to the Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 26.

the social diagnosis of apartheid and then offered methods for Christian action against apartheid. Arguing that God sides with the oppressed and wants to liberate the people, the document called for participating in the struggle, transforming regular church activities into social change, the initiation of special campaigns against the apartheid system in churches, activities of civil disobedience against a tyrannical government, and the provision of moral guidance, including counseling the liberators against those who would act “thoughtlessly and wildly.”

The prophetic theology was articulated in terms of classical reformed arguments against tyranny. A government that acts against the common good that it is to serve is no government and needs to be replaced with a just government. The document recognized that the majority of Christians in the country were oppressed by the present apartheid ideology and the government, and had already chosen to replace it. It set itself against the theology of both the apartheid ideology and the temporizing opposition to apartheid of the English churches. In this case, church participation in the struggle deepened and within five years change came to South Africa, and the theological contribution in this predominantly Christian nation was recognized. The document also helped Christians abroad think through the situation in South Africa and assist in supporting the struggle through divestment activities, boycotts, and civil disobedience.

Kairos Central America

The *Kairos Central American* document of 1988 evolved through a process in which hundreds were involved in the midst of civil wars. It was a time of the height of liberation theology and the document expressed many of its themes. The sensitive reader picks up more Marxist themes than in the South African one and, to that degree, it is closer to the language of Tillich’s circle than its predecessor.

The American empire is the enemy that allies with the church and the establishment to keep the poor in their exploited position. Jesus, the prophets, and Mary who identify with the suffering of the poor are called into service as enemies of the empire. God’s Kingdom, a utopia, is to

be built on earth by the exploited masses of Central America, and the process is seen in the success of the Sandinista movement in Nicaragua. The exploitation began with the Spanish conquest, and resistance against it has occurred for 500 years, but now, in the present, opposition to the evil of the establishment is rising and can succeed in restoring peace and justice to Central America. Readers of the document are asked to take sides in the struggle with the poor to overthrow the rulers. The hour is seen as decisive by the writers. More than 200,000 had been killed in the previous ten years of struggle and the writers believed history was coming to a climax. "This historic hour in Central America is a Kairos, the passing of God incarnate in Jesus, through the burning waste of Central America, calling us to fight for the Kingdom, to the cross, to unwavering hope, to invincible unity, to resurrection triumph."⁵

The appeals of the theologians assisting in the revolutions were heard abroad during the cold war. In a peacemaking presentation in the University of Berlin, I met theologians who were studying Spanish to better grasp liberation theology and who proudly presented me with Nicaraguan coffee in 1983. But when I asked Bernard Häring in the Vatican how many were studying liberation theology there, he replied two, one of my students and myself! The Vatican with its campaign to free Poland was not about to support any leftist revolution against the United States in Central America. The Reagan Administration, acting for the United States, thought it was fighting the cold war there and not that it was aligning against a genuine, long standing revolution of the poor. The document dismisses this overreaction from the United States, but it was real and to a degree as determinative, as the opposition of the Catholic Church or the Latin American establishment. My own visits to Central and South America out of sympathy with the revolutionaries and the liberation theologians in 1990 led me to believe the fall of the USSR had negative consequences for the liberation movements in Latin America. As the Vatican encouraged the hardening of the hierarchy against liberation theology, the local authorities often responded to discredit the movement. Even within Peru, Father Gustavo Gutierrez's movements were limited. I agree the revolutionaries found a moment

⁵ "Kairos Central America," *Ibid.*, 95.

of personal and communal kairos, but the progressives were up against fierce opposition, which they named as anti-kingdom forces. For the most part the establishment won the battles leaving a progressive remnant to work in more modest ways to hope for the future, but the radical change was defeated and murdered. Before the fall of the Soviet Union, decision makers in the U.S. were pushed to extreme measures. Congress tried to shut down support for overthrowing the Sandinista government. President Regan and his cohorts attempted to supply the Contras through the Iran- Contra deal, thereby discrediting their foreign policy and proving several of them guilty of illegal acts. The denial of the humanity of the poor continued. The resultant migration continues to threaten Republicans in the United States where the latest census records 50 million Hispanics, many of whom are refugees from those wars and poverty. My colleague, Gonzalo Castillo-Cardenas, and I toured Latin American Liberation projects in 1990 from Nicaragua to Chile. Recently, in reflecting on the Central American experience, he suggested: “Our hopes for change were too high.” There has been little improvement in the condition of the poor.⁶

While Robert MacAfee Brown sees similarities to the Barmen Declaration in these theologies, I see more cultural analysis characteristic of Tillich. The analysis is more of the church than Tillich’s use of *kairos*, and the church is called to action in a way that Tillich could only have hoped for. However, the wider and more dramatic social critique is much more characteristic of Tillich than of Barth. The Barmen Declaration, for all of its power is mostly confined to the argument for the freedom of the church to follow only Christ.⁷ Brown began his story of kairos with Tillich’s use of kairos, and then in an ending, he challenged the North American churches included the Barmen Declaration in the book.

⁶ Gonzalo Castillo-Cardenas phone call on April 4, 2011.

⁷ See: Matthew Lon Weaver, “Theology of Resistance in Bonhoeffer and Barth,” in Robert L. Stivers and Ronald H. Stone, eds. *Resistance and Theological Ethics* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 299-312.

Kairos and Church Struggle: Two Documents

Two church documents written in the last score of years take the struggle straight to the church while not neglecting the social and historical context. *The Road to Damascus: Kairos and Conversion* was published deliberately on the tenth anniversary of the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua, July 19, 1989. It represented, according to the document, the reflections of hundreds of people in Africa, Central America, and Asia. It is framed in terms of liberation theology and thousands of persons indicated by signing the document that it reflected their will. It focused on the conflict between the left wing and the right wing within the Christian community. This conflict, resulting in oppression and murder, is the *kairos* of which the document speaks. The theme of Paul's conversion from a persecutor to an apostle on the Damascus Road carries the proclamation on into the conflict within the communities of the church. The Church's absorption into the Empire is regarded as apostasy leading to idolatry, and right-wing Christianity is denounced as heretical.

We have wished to make it quite clear that those Christians who side with the imperialists, the oppressors and the exploiters of people, are siding with idolaters who worship power, money, privilege and pleasure.⁸

Kairos Europa flowed from the Ecumenical Assembly of European Churches in Basel in 1989. It is a movement interpreted as attempting to gather the churches into a *Status Confessionis* against neo-liberal economics and its consequences. Ulrich Duchrow models his remarks after the Barmen Confession and treats neo-liberal economic practice in national economies, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund as similar to Nazism and apartheid of the 20th century, even though its consequences of death and exclusion are more indirect.

The churches are called to redirect their investments and property to serve ecological and social welfare causes and away from banks and other institutions supporting capitalist globalization. A socially responsible economy is sought which practices ecological responsibility. The movement calls for combating speculation, structural adjustment policies, lower taxes for the wealthy, the 1979 monetary policy, and privatiza-

⁸ The Road to Damascus: Kairos and Conversion in Brown, 137.

tion. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches, in its organization, has developed many studies around Confession and economics, and finds the means of confession palatable to many of its leaders. Resistance to the trend is high among Reformed Christians in the U.S., placing more trust in the market mechanisms of the economy and its host of international institutions. The *Kairos Europa* tends toward the sharpness of *The Road to Damascus* document but with more of an emphasis upon economic theory. Earlier attempts to move toward a *Status Confessionis* against recent neo-liberal economic trends have been led by Czech theologians more sympathetic to socialism than the Reformed populations of the United States. Tillich's Kairos Circle concentrated less upon international economics, but the economic directions of that circle are distantly echoed in this form of *Kairos* document. The author admits to less direct involvement with these two documents than the previous three and turns now toward the *Kairos Palestine* document "A Moment of Truth." The publication of the document and conversations with two of the authors inspired this paper.

Palestinian Kairos

The 2009 call to faith and action by the writers of *Kairos Palestine* honors the model of the South African document, and it hopes to contribute to the liberation of Palestine. My visitations and study of Palestine since 1980 contribute to my support of their reading of the facts on the ground. They are occupied, subjected to apartheid like oppression, humiliated, and impoverished. Like the North American Native Americans, their land has been taken, their homes and crops destroyed, and they have been confined to reserves where they are dependent upon the welfare of others for their survival. The writers of the document do not see signs of immediate or near-time relief. They fear they may be close to losing hope for their own state despite the world's clamor that their rights be recognized. For them the *kairos* is a moment to speak, to tell the truth, and as they say: "Kairos is the moment when we see God's gifts in the midst of our suffering."⁹

⁹ *Kairos Palestine: A Moment of Truth*, (www.kairopalestine.ps, 2010), 4.

The document is less on economics than on political theology. It lacks the socialist tendencies of the previous three documents; rather it is asking for the use of capitalist or mixed-economic means of boycott, divestment, and sanctions to dislodge Israel from its occupation. To this extent, it is quite different from the political-economic theology of the original Kairos Circle, yet it focuses on time.

As Tillich, later as a supporter of Zionism, shifted from the "Time" interpretation for Israel to the "Space and Time" interpretation, this document is pushing for a Space-Time perspective. Jerusalem or Al-Quds is central to the document, and it is claimed as the future capitol of Palestine. I read a paper on the pro-Zionism of Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr to a Christian audience including Arab scholars at Tantur between Jerusalem and Bethlehem in 1980. As the 2009 Christian document asserts, their perspective is that the sins of Europe should not have been repented at the expense of the Arabs, as I was informed at that time. The issue is the land, and as an old Sioux chief in Iowa said before he was murdered: "The white man wants all of the land." To the Palestinian farmers, shepherds, and olive grove workers I have visited, that is the issue here. In the United Nations, only the United States of America supports Israel's daily expansion of its control of the land and water of Palestine.

Beyond the facts of Israel's occupation and expansion on the ground, the document moves to its theology. It presents a Palestinian interpretation of faith, hope, and love as its foundations. Biblical criticism is accepted and fundamentalism rejected. While theological themes are discussed, the idea that political policy could be read directly out of scripture is rejected. The Bible must be interpreted in a living way, and in accordance with the rejection of repression, slavery, and the domination of one people over another at their expense. The document seems to me to be less utopian than some of the predecessor documents, and, if in their enthusiasm for political change they slipped into romanticism, this document avoids those illusions. It is most Tillichian in its use of love, power, and justice, though it does not use Tillich's ontology at this point. Its one is that of the mature Christian realist Tillich who is demanding political change, perhaps in a tone like his denunciation of Hitler in 1933 or Senator Goldwater in 1964.

It is most unlike Tillich in its rejection of Zionism and avoidance of socialist terminology.

The occupation is denounced as sin. Resistance to oppression is to be carried out under the ethic of love. Such an ethic based in an understanding of Jesus must reject fighting evil with evil, but hue to non-violent resistance. The history of resistance includes trying to defend their land through Israel's courts. Political petitions are reissued while being beaten and rebuilding their homes. I have eaten in homes destroyed by Israel four times, and in tents removed regularly and reestablished. To hold onto their land, they have built dwellings in caves when home-rebuilding is forbidden. Their resistance includes civil disobedience, and I have joined with other Christians, Jews and Muslim demonstrators in actions both tolerated and repressed by Israel. Resistance has included violence as a response to violence, but the writers and signers of the document reject the evil of violence and call for non-violent suffering. Their major call for solidarity from the world churches is a request that they come on pilgrimage to Palestine and they pledge to show them the reality of Palestine while they pray with them. Sabeel, the ecumenical liberation theology center in Jerusalem, has developed its own liturgies for such pilgrimages, but adjusts its use of its rather political liturgy to the needs of visiting groups. They also ask churches to join with the Palestinian Christians in supporting boycotts, divestment, and sanctions against the occupation.

While rejecting the concepts of religiously based states, they pledge to work with their enemies and allies to build states for all that are based in justice and civil liberties. Within Sabeel, which is involved in the document, and often blamed for it, the debate between their policy of two states and a one state solution continues. While there are articulate Palestinian voices for the one state solution, as Israel's aggression with U.S. support seems invincible, this would be a reluctant recognition of reality. The preferred outcome would be two states with Jerusalem divided or internationalized, refugees repatriated or compensated, and the 1967 boundaries restored. The language of reconciliation and forgiveness in the document seems consistent with the characters of the writers I know listed on the document.

The document, though prophetic in its denunciations and strategies, has been endorsed by the heads of many of the churches in Palestine and for study by North American churches. It is part of the struggle within North American Protestantism to begin the divestment from American corporations that support the occupation that is against international law. Israel and Jewish denunciations of the *Kairos Palestine* are frequent, and they are available on the internet with entries under Kairos. Similarly Protestant churches in the United States are subjected to heavy Jewish lobbying when they consider divesting from selected firms that refuse to withdraw their support from the occupation. Though the Presbyterian General Assembly called for the study of the document and partially endorsed it, some local Presbyteries, afraid of Jewish pressure, avoid studying it. These debates and interventions are reminiscent of the divestment debates around apartheid in South Africa. I am not certain of which stage of the debate they represent. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) finally divested from firms involved in supporting apartheid in South Africa, but I received anti-divestment literature, particularly from the Wall Street Journal, from the President of the Seminary at which I taught until Nelson Mandela became president and apartheid was abolished. At present, many in that same economically conservative denomination including financial leaders regard divestment as a last resort rather than as a normal, useful tool of non-violent social change from massive evil toward justice. The denomination officially and practically supports the state of Israel and is committed to its protection; it has not yet found an effective way to support the rights of the Arab (Christian and non-Christian) populations suffering under that country's occupation. In this, its response differs little from the official policies of the United States. To refer to the distinctions of the South African document of state, church, and prophetic theologies, my denomination is still caught in church theology with only echoes of prophetic theology. In its mildness, it covertly supports the state ideology, although, while unable to divest its own funds, it has called for the ending of U.S. foreign aid to Israel's military.

In conclusion: Tillich was correct in his *Systematic Theology* that the *kairos* theology has its own life. Political, economic, theological, and ideological elements are all involved in social change as are non-

violent and violent means of change. The Palestinian document inspired these reflections, but as it recognized, its time is not immediate, and it differs from the more socialist documents in being less involved in economic analysis. On the other hand, the *kairos* as eternal meaning intersecting the present is certainly evident in the Arab speaking world, and Palestine may not be immune in ways not previously perceived by the authors of the Palestinian document. Religion and socialism are reconciled in many places and Tillich's early theology is relevant, but it must remember that it was pre-New Deal. New developments of it may become relevant under social-welfare and mixed-market economies. Likewise, *The Road to Damascus: Kairos and Conversion* and *Kairos Europa* are realized more as critical utopias than as immediate actionable historical projects. *Kairos Central America* was defeated by state and church, but the poverty and suffering of Latin America still cry out for revolutionary change. The American Presbyterian dream of countering American militarism has been eclipsed by militarism and economic interests, and the *kairos* they perceived has been buried under church bureaucratization and national security concerns. The South African *Kairos Document* has approached the closest to fulfillment. Tillich saw his vision in the twenties as relevant to small groups, but it has grown to where it calls forth church responses and sometimes these come close to realization. When our movements fail or nearly fail, those still nurturing aspects of Tillich's vision are saved from cynicism by the same Spirit that prompted them in the first place.