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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

Paul Tillich's concept of God opposes the "interventionist" model of traditional Western theism. This paper attempts to determine whether, and in what sense, for Tillich, God may be said to act specifically to influence the course of historical events. It is argued that his concept of "Spiritual power" provides his answer. In clarification the concepts of "spirit," "power," "meaning," "vocation," "kairos," and "the renunciation of power" are explored. According to Tillich, the vocations of specific social groups are empowered by divine power, providing both gift and task. For Christians the vocation of Jesus the Christ to proclaim the coming Kingdom of God as the ultimate meaning of history provides the criterion by which concrete vocations may be judged. God acts by providing meaning, which must be chosen and achieved.

TILlich ON DIVINE POWER AND ULTIMATE MEANING IN HUMAN HISTORY

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RÉSUMÉ : Chez Paul Tillich, le concept de Dieu s'oppose au modèle « interventionniste » du théisme traditionnel en Occident. Cet article se propose de déterminer si, et en quel sens, d'après Tillich, on peut dire que Dieu agit pour influencer le cours des événements historiques. On soutient que son concept de « pouvoir Spirituel » fournit une réponse à cette question. Pour clarifier cette thèse, on explore les concepts d'esprit, de pouvoir, de sens, de vocation, de kairos et de renoncement au pouvoir. Selon Tillich, la vocation de groupes sociaux déterminés est animée d'un pouvoir divin conférant tout ensemble un don et une tâche. Pour les chrétiens, la vocation de Jésus le Christ, qui consiste à proclamer la venue du Royaume de Dieu comme le sens ultime de l'histoire, constitue le critère permettant de juger les vocations concrètes. Dieu agit en offrant un sens, qui doit être choisi et réalisé.

ABSTRACT : Paul Tillich's concept of God opposes the "interventionist" model of traditional Western theism. This paper attempts to determine whether, and in what sense, for Tillich, God may be said to act specifically to influence the course of historical events. It is argued that his concept of "Spiritual power" provides his answer. In clarification the concepts of "spirit," "power," "meaning," "vocation," "kairos," and "the renunciation of power" are explored. According to Tillich, the vocations of specific social groups are empowered by divine power, providing both gift and task. For Christians the vocation of Jesus the Christ to proclaim the coming Kingdom of God as the ultimate meaning of history provides the criterion by which concrete vocations may be judged. God acts by providing meaning, which must be chosen and achieved.

I. THE PROBLEM OF DIVINE POWER IN HISTORY

The attempt to find ultimate meaning in the great events of human history, whether those perceived to be primarily man-made (e.g., the Nazi-perpetrated Holocaust, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the events of 9/11) or those attributed to natural causes (e.g., the Indonesian tsunami, the Haitian earthquake, the Icelandic volcanic eruption), is a perennial human impulse. The question arises whether there is anything of ultimate significance, any divine "weighing in" (exertion of divine power) in favor of any particular direction taken by the course of events. Responses range from evangelical preacher Pat Robertson's bizarre suggestion of divine inter-

vention — that the Haitian earthquake was divine retribution for a pact made with the devil by Haitians in the 18th century — to the secular despair of all meaning — the view that such large events are “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

Progressive opinion, even that sympathetically disposed toward Western religion, has become wary of attributing specific events to the divine will. Yet when issues of great national or international moment are at stake, political and religious leaders in the Western world (especially in the U.S.A.) express the desire and intention to align themselves with what they perceive to be the divine purpose (John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and George W. Bush are three prominent examples). It is perhaps fair to say that the Western religious tradition has by and large remained committed to the possibility of divine intervention in history (while acknowledging the mystery of divine intentions). At the same time it is probably safe to say that the prevailing scientific perspective rejects the possibility of direct divine intervention, rejects, that is to say, the insertion of energy (i.e., causation) from outside the known universe.¹ The question remains whether the only alternative to an interventionist God is the total abandonment of a theology of divine action in history.

What is the position of Paul Tillich on the issue of divine power in world history? Clearly Tillich rejects the interventionist convictions of traditional theism.² Tillich's concept of God as the Ground and Power of Being rather than as a separate, transcendent being has been much discussed, criticized and defended. Nevertheless, ambiguities remain regarding the various ways in which, according to Tillich, this God may be said to act in the world. It is possible to distinguish four aspects of divine action in human history according to Tillich's account: 1) God's “sustaining creativity” in everything that is; 2) distinctive aspects of the creation of meaning in history; 3) “Spiritual power” in history; 4) the overarching “inner directedness” of being toward individualization (separation) and toward reunion (love). Let us address briefly each of these aspects.

1) Tillich's God does not need to intervene in nature or history to be present there, for in his theology, symbolically speaking, God *is* the power of being in everything and as such is “the source of all particular powers of being.”³ The volcano, the earthquake, the rogue nation, the nation championing justice, the sinner and the

1. For a current discussion of these matters, cf. Richard GRIGG, *Beyond the God Delusion: How Radical Theology Harmonizes Science and Religion*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2008.

2. Addressing the issue of historical providence, Tillich writes: “Providence is not interference; it is creation. It uses all factors, both those given by freedom and those given by destiny, in creatively directing everything toward its fulfillment [...]. Providence is ‘the divine condition’ which is present in every group of finite conditions and in the totality of finite conditions. It is not an additional factor, a miraculous physical or mental interference in terms of supernaturalism. It is the quality of inner directedness present in every situation. The man who believes in providence does not believe that a special divine activity will alter the conditions of finitude and estrangement. He believes, and asserts with the courage of faith, that no situation whatsoever can frustrate the fulfillment of his ultimate destiny” (TILlich, *Systematic Theology*, I, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1951, p. 267; cf. Paul TILlich, *Love, Power, and Justice*, London, Oxford University Press, 1954, p. 110). Tillich's whole critique of supernaturalism is relevant here — cf. Paul TILlich, *The Courage to Be*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1952, p. 182-190.

3. ID., *Systematic Theology*, III, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1963, p. 385.

saint — all are ultimately empowered by the source of all being, which is God's creative power.⁴ It is in this sense that God can be spoken of as "Almighty."⁵ Indeed, for Tillich all power, understood as "the eternal possibility of resisting non-being," ultimately comes from God. Therefore, "since God as *the* power of being is the source of all particular powers of being, power is divine in its essential nature."⁶ — 2) According to Tillich's approach, distinct aspects of divine power must be considered when time, history, and freedom are taken into account. In history, through freedom, being "rises above itself" and transcends the necessities of its given nature; here, meaning is given and received. Tillich writes: "The new, which occurs whenever history occurs, is meaning. In creating meaning, being rises above itself [...] in creating meaning, being gains freedom from itself, from the necessity of its nature [...]. Freedom is the leap in which history transgresses [transcends ?] the realm of pure [mere ?] being and creates meaning."⁷ Though Tillich does not characteristically express himself in these terms, it would seem that "meaning" is a co-creation of the human and the divine. Meaning is "given" (destiny), but it must be received and embraced (freedom). Also meaning has both a present and a future aspect; it is both gift and demand. Thus meaning includes purpose; but Tillich insists that meaning must be more than merely idea or ideal (hence more than merely demand or future prospect); it must have some power of being. As anticipated and inevitably coming, the goal is in some sense already present and real; it is "destiny." God acts in giving meaning, but, when misperceived and misdirected by human beings, meaning becomes "demonic" (drawing upon divine power for destructive ends).⁸ — 3) Tillich also speaks of "Spiritual power" — which would seem to have a special role in

4. Tillich writes approvingly of Luther: In an interpretation of God's omnipotence, "Luther gives an interpretation of nature and history. He says: 'Therefore the creatures are, so to speak, the masks of God. All creatures are God's masks and veils. God makes them work and help him to create many things.' Therefore all natural orders and institutions are filled with the divine presence, and so is the historical process. The Goths and the Vandals and the Turks [...] and today we would say the Nazis [...] are driven by him to attack and to destroy; and in this sense he speaks to us through them. [...] although God acts in everything in history, history is at the same time the struggle between God and Satan and their purposes. And Luther mediates these ideas by saying that God acts substantially even in Satan [...] and rightly so, because how could Satan have being without God if God is the power of being in everything?" (Paul TILlich, "The Recovery of the Prophetic Tradition in the Reformation," in *Faith and Thought*, 2, 1 [Spring 1984], p. 10, Lecture delivered at the Washington Cathedral Library, Nov., 1950); cf. also *Philosophical Interrogations*, ed. by Sydney and Beatrice ROME, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964, p. 384, where TILlich states: "The individual is not a mere 'mode' of the eternal substance, but he has that independence which is implied in the possibility of turning against himself [...] and consequently against his divine ground. But this does not make him ontologically independent. God's sustaining creativity, as Martin Luther asserts, gives the arm of the murderer the power to stab his victim."

5. Paul TILlich, *Love, Power, and Justice*, London, Oxford University Press, 1954, p. 110-111; cf. ID., *Political Expectation*, ed. by James Luther ADAMS, New York, Harper and Row, 1971, p. 116.

6. TILlich, *Systematic Theology*, III, p. 385.

7. ID., *The Interpretation of History*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936, p. 273. Brackets are my suggestions for alternative translations.

8. For meaning as "grace and present, not only demand and future," cf. the following reflection about the Christ event: "Only a meaningful reality can give meaning to history. History is constituted by the appearance of an unconditioned meaning not as a demand but as existent, not as an idea but as the temporal and paradoxical anticipation of the ultimate perfection" (*ibid.*, p. 262). For a description of how interpretations of history become destructive, cf. *ibid.*, p. 263.

working toward the goal and comprehending the ultimate meaning of human history. It will be contended here that Tillich does not clearly or consistently distinguish this power from the other types of divine power. An attempt will be made here to clarify Tillich's use of this term. — 4) Finally, Tillich speaks broadly of separation and reunion as an overarching framework that can be thought of as the purpose of being. He derives what he calls "transcendental norms" from this framework, but this paper will contend that aspects 2) and 3) give specificity to Tillich's position on the issues at hand. Therefore, attention will be devoted primarily to exploring aspects 2) and 3) of divine action, with consideration given to how meaning is created and to the role of Spiritual power in achieving the goal and in finding the ultimate meaning of history. Since our primary interest is in divine power and ultimate meaning *in human history*, our focus will be on social groups rather than on individuals, with illustrative reference to empires. (Issues relating to individual "salvation" require separate treatment, which will not be attempted here.) For clarification of these themes we refer first to Tillich's concept of "spirit," and then to further exploration of the terms "power" and "meaning."

II. SPIRIT, POWER, AND SPIRITUAL POWER

Tillich proposes recovering the term "spirit" (in English), understood as "the unity of power and meaning." (The divine Spirit must be understood by analogy with the human spirit: "Without knowing what spirit is, one cannot know what Spirit is."⁹) For Tillich spirit (hence, by analogy, Spirit) is not simply powerless thought, form, or structure, nor is it chaotic, blind, formless vitality; it is vitality directed toward meaningful contents. In our experience only human beings *are* spirit (except again, by analogy, the divine Spirit). Other beings have vitality, but lack meaningful directionality. Laws, logical/mathematical constructs, and universal ideas are meaningful, but lack power. Thus spirit includes and transcends the dualities of mind and body, thought and extension in space, form and content.¹⁰ In the realm of spirit tragic conflicts appear. On the one hand, power that has lost touch with meaning becomes brute force, and is therefore destructive.¹¹ On the other hand, meaning without power is impotent and ineffective. (This emphasis is behind Tillich's insistence that meaning — to be effective — must be not simply demand or prediction, nor simply idea or ideal; it must be in some sense "existent," must have "being," must be in some sense a present interest or life tendency, thus in some sense "given").¹²

9. ID., *Systematic Theology*, III, p. 22. Oddly, Tillich insists here that while the term "spirit" may be recovered, "the adjective 'spiritual' is lost beyond hope. This book will not even attempt to re-establish it in its original meaning"; he then proceeds to use the word "spiritual" throughout the book.

10. In terms of TILlich's ontology, laid out in *Systematic Theology*, I, the three polarities that he calls "ontological elements" add specificity to the overarching polarity of power and meaning: power encompasses individualization, vitality, and freedom; meaning encompasses participation, form, and destiny (cf. p. 249, 174-186).

11. Cf. ID., *Systematic Theology*, III, p. 342.

12. Cf. TILlich's references to "interests" and "life-tendencies," in *The Interpretation of History*, p. 190-191.

Power, in and of itself, as resistance to the threat of nonbeing, involves overcoming threats from other beings ; hence it typically includes the use of coercion or compulsion. Tillich is contending here that every being must affirm itself — not only its existence but also its meaning — in competition with other beings. In the case of social groups this involves not only making a *place* for itself vis-à-vis another group, but also forcing a *meaning* upon another group. As a result, the exertion of power is ambiguous, and even tragic, for the reception of meaning requires freedom. Tillich speaks of “that character of power from which all its distortions follow. It is a fact that power implies the possibility of coercion, the threat of the application of force. And it is not only a possibility and a threat, but a tragically unavoidable reality in the existence of the human race.” Coercion is tragic “because it transforms the object of coercion, at least partly, into a thing, a mere object that is deprived of its spontaneity, of its living response ; or, in the case of a person, he is deprived of his freedom to act out of the totality of his being.”¹³ At the same time meanings, which give power to social groups, though inherently containing an element of unconditionality (holiness), are corruptible, and capable of becoming “demonic.” Some meanings or interpretations of history are relatively creative, others are destructive ; some may be creative at one stage and destructive at another.¹⁴ Thus in human history both power and meaning are ambiguous. Human spirit can be in tune with the divine or it can be demonic ; often in history it is both.

In the context of discussion of the ambiguities of power Tillich introduces the concept of “Spiritual power.” (He can use this term both with a capital S and with a lower-case s, suggesting that it can apply both to God and to human beings. This close connection of terms leads to a possible ambiguity : it is not always clear when Tillich is referring to Spiritual power and when to spiritual power. His apparent intent is to suggest that they are basically one.) For him spiritual power is a reality that “conquers the ambiguities of power” (and implicitly, perhaps, the ambiguities of meaning as well).¹⁵ The use of this phrase poses some difficulties for Tillich’s thought (and not simply because he has forsworn the use of the adjective, “spiritual”). If spirit is the unity of power and meaning isn’t all power that is linked with meaning “spiritual” ? At least there is the possibility of confusion here. Perhaps this is why Tillich used the phrase sparingly in his later works, though it does appear.¹⁶ It figures most prominently in his important discussion of “the renunciation of power.”¹⁷ In *Love, Power, and Justice*, Tillich raises the question whether, in order to resolve the

13. ID., *Political Expectation*, New York, Harper and Row, 1971, p. 119. Cf. also *Love, Power, and Justice*, p. 47 ; *Systematic Theology*, III, p. 309, 385.

14. Cf. TILlich’s critique of capitalism and nationalism as demonries that are both creative and destructive : *Paul Tillich on Creativity*, ed. by Jacquelyn Ann K. KEGLEY, University Press of America, 1989, p. 88-90.

15. TILlich, *Love, Power, and Justice*, p. 121 ; cf. p. 119-121.

16. Cf. ID., *Systematic Theology*, III, p. 117, where he does use the phrase, but p. 115, where he uses Spiritual Presence and avoids Spiritual power.

17. Cf. ID., *Political Expectation*, p. 122-124 ; *Love, Power, and Justice*, p. 120-121 ; *The Interpretation of History*, p. 197-200 ; *Systematic Theology*, III, p. 382-388.

ambiguities of power, spiritual power can renounce power altogether. I quote this significant passage at length :

The ambiguities of power are rooted in the dynamic character and the compulsory implications of power. Spiritual power is not the conquest of these ambiguities by resignation of power, because this would mean resignation of being. It would be an attempt to annihilate oneself in order to escape guilt. Spiritual power is not the denial of power dynamics. In many stories about the working of the Spiritual power bodily effects are mentioned, like elevation, removal from one place to the other, shock, and horror. There are always psychological effects visible. Spirit is power, grasping and moving out of the dimension of the ultimate. It is not identical with the realm of ideas or meanings. It is dynamic power, overcoming resistance. Then what is its difference from other forms of power ? The Spiritual power works neither through bodily nor through psychological compulsion. It works through man's total personality, and this means, through him as finite freedom. It does not remove his freedom, but it makes his freedom free from the compulsory elements which limit it.¹⁸

In a later essay Tillich arrives at a formulation that appears to contradict the above. Addressing the question whether love should "demand the resignation of power altogether," he writes : "Power through resignation of power is a human possibility, for which one uses the term 'spiritual power.' That kind of power cannot use force, for every spiritual influence is received in the totality of our person and presupposes a free, deliberating, and deciding center."¹⁹ The difficulty here is that Tillich wants to affirm two partially contradictory ideas. On the one hand, spiritual power is more than conscious, moral persuasion. It "moves" us (a physical metaphor), in more than conscious ways ("bodily effects"). On the other hand, human freedom must not be violated. One reading of the above passages is to suggest, as Tillich does elsewhere, that power contains two elements — a creative, non-compulsory element, and a compulsory element.²⁰ In that case spiritual power might be power purified by removing the compulsory element. However, Tillich qualifies this possibility in various ways. At one point he contends that compulsion is not bad in and of itself, but only if it "does not express the power of being in the name of which it is applied. Power needs compulsion, but compulsion needs the criterion which is implied in the actual power relation."²¹ This seems to suggest that some powers flow from the realities of a particular situation ; others contradict those realities (as, perhaps, a desperate dictator might impose controls and restraints that are contrary to the will of a people). Tillich also refers to criteria or norms for the exertion of power (apparently including coercive power) — such "symbols of transcendence" as love, justice, and unification.²²

Tillich asserts that political groups cannot renounce "coercive power [...] no nation should surrender its existence in time and space. [...] It must use force and take

18. ID., *Love, Power, and Justice*, p. 120.

19. ID., "Shadow and Substance : A Theory of Power," in *Political Expectation*, p. 122.

20. ID., *Love, Power, and Justice*, p. 113.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 48. Tillich here is struggling with issues of "legitimate" power or authority, issues that he does not fully resolve. Cf. Langdon GILKEY, *Reaping the Whirlwind : A Christian Interpretation of History*, Eugene, Wipf & Stock, 2000 (previously pub. by Seabury Press, 1981), p. 19-29, and esp. p. 331, n. 49.

22. TILlich, *The Interpretation of History*, p. 198.

upon itself the tragic consequences for itself and for others of such use. [...] Human existence does not permit the utopia of power lacking all compelling force.”²³ This means that Tillich rejects political pacifism.²⁴ The church, as a social institution, however, *can and must* renounce coercive power. In Tillich’s view, religions like Christianity and Buddhism “presuppose [...] the positive possibility of renunciation of power.” This is because these religions transcend the realm of ordinary power struggles. And he further asserts that any group that freely decides “to have power only in the paradoxical form of renunciation of power,” and to govern itself by the transcendental norms of love, justice, and unification, can become what a “church” essentially should be.²⁵ Additionally, Tillich insists that every power, because of its essential link with meaning, contains an element of the transcendence of power, an element of “holiness” (just as every contingent meaning contains an element of unconditioned meaning).²⁶ Though Tillich does not seem entirely comfortable with this outcome, it seems fair to conclude that spiritual power can be viewed as power purified of coercion. This power empowers reconciling meaning, and is an expression of divine power in history. We must now further address the term “meaning.”

III. MEANING AND VOCATION IN HISTORY

Thus far we have used “meaning,” as found in Tillich’s vocabulary, without giving it a clear definition. I offer here the proposal that for Tillich meaning is truth that is applicable to a particular historical circumstance, and I offer as a prime example of such truth the idea of “vocation.” Tillich suggests that “history-bearing” groups must project meaning as well as power, and meaning is embodied in the aims toward which the group strives. One crucial way that social groups have understood the “givenness” of their aims or destinies, according to Tillich, has been in terms of their “vocational consciousness.” He writes : “It is [...] not only the power of the group in terms of enforceable internal unity and external security but also the aim toward which it strives which makes it a history-bearing group. History runs in a horizontal direction, and the groups which give it this direction are determined by an aim toward which they strive and a destiny they try to fulfill. One could call this the ‘vocational consciousness’ of a history-bearing group.”²⁷ Thus a vocation — a meaning attached to the life-process of a particular historical group — is both given and striven for, both a destiny and something to be freely sought (and that also can be missed or corrupted). At several places Tillich lists a number of groups and nations in Middle Eastern and European history that have expressed their power in terms of a vocational consciousness : ancient Israel, ancient Greece, Rome, medieval Germany, Spain,

23. *Id.*, *Political Expectation*, p. 122-123.

24. Cf. e.g., *Id.*, *Systematic Theology*, III, p. 387.

25. *Id.*, *The Interpretation of History*, p. 197-199. There is a continuing terminological confusion here because Tillich persists in using the term “power” whether including or excluding coercion.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 198-199.

27. *Id.*, *Systematic Theology*, III, p. 310 ; cf. p. 340-341 ; for vocation cf. also *Love, Power, and Justice*, p. 101-104 ; *The Future of Religions*, New York, Harper and Row, 1966, p. 59-61.

early modern France, England (“England’s vocational consciousness was rooted partly in the Calvinistic idea of world politics for the preservation of pure Christianity, partly in the Christian-humanistic feeling of responsibility for the colonial countries and for a solid balance of power between civilized nations. This was inseparably united with an economic and political power drive and produced the largest Empire of all times and almost eighty years of European peace”²⁸). Tillich uses the Hegelian term “spiritual substance” to refer to these callings (the embodiment of spirit in social content), and clearly views them as fragmentary and ambiguous but on the whole positive, though also corrupted, contributions to world history.²⁹ Insofar as vocations are “gifts” they can be viewed as divine actions in the world.

Tillich speaks of the mid 20th century as a time of the clash, not only of two imperial powers, but of two types of vocational consciousness : the Soviet Union and the U.S.A. Of America’s vocation, Tillich writes :

America’s vocational consciousness has been called “the American dream”, namely to establish the earthly form of the kingdom of God by a new beginning. The old forms of oppressive power were left behind and a new start was made. In the Constitution and the living democracy (both are quasi-religious concepts in the United States) the will is embodied to actualize what is felt as the American vocation. [...] The actual power drive working together with this vocational feeling is still rather limited. But the historical situation increases it more and more. And it is already justified to speak of half-conscious American imperialism.³⁰

Tillich did not live to see the dissolution of the Soviet Union, but he saw clearly both the promise and the peril of the American sense of vocation. Vocations give meaning to historical experience, but they are corruptible, either by claiming absoluteness for themselves vis-à-vis other groups, or by losing the “demand” aspect, believing that the goal has already been achieved.³¹

IV. KAIROS AND THE ULTIMATE MEANING OF HISTORY

Tillich’s approach to meaning in history can be further clarified by an examination of his concept of “kairos.” One can say that this concept provided Tillich with a way to incorporate time and history into being and essence, “not empty time, pure expiration ; not the mere duration either, but rather qualitatively fulfilled time, the

28. ID., *Love, Power, and Justice*, p. 102-103.

29. For these lists, cf. *ibid.*, p. 101-104 ; ID., *Systematic Theology*, III, p. 310-311, 340-342 ; *The Future of Religions*, p. 59-61. Cf. also Tillich’s reference to the absence of vocational consciousness in 20th century Germany with deleterious effects : ID., *Political Expectation*, p. 103-104, and *Love, Power, and Justice*, p. 103. And cf. vocational consciousness among the proletariat : ID., “The Class Struggle and Religious Socialism,” in *Paul Tillich on Creativity*, p. 104-109, and Jean RICHARD’s analysis of this passage in *Paul Tillich : A New Catholic Assessment*, ed. by Raymond BULMAN and Frederick PARRELLA, Collegeville, Minn., The Liturgical Press, 1994, p. 154-155.

30. TILlich, *Love, Power, and Justice*, p. 103-104.

31. Cf. Tillich’s reference to “exclusiveness” : ID., *The Future of Religions*, p. 61 ; and his reference to losing the aspect of “striving toward a purpose,” as in nationalism : *The Interpretation of History*, p. 263.

moment that is creation and fate [...] fate and decision.”³² In contrast to scientific or clock time, where every moment is the same as every other (“chronos”), kairos time for Tillich is “the historical moment in which something new, eternally important, manifests itself in temporal forms, in the potentialities and tasks of a special period.” Tillich links this thinking with the “prophetic spirit,” and finds in it an orientation toward “the criticism of what is given and the hope for what is to come.”³³ James Luther Adams suggests that, for Tillich, the kairos experience is what it means “to be grasped by the creative significance of the present moment,” and he proposes that the concept “was born out of an attempt to come to terms with Utopianism.”³⁴ To this might be added the thought that it was the distinctive form of utopianism found in Hegel and Marx that most influenced Tillich — their distinctive way of uniting “ideal norms and historical reality.”³⁵ Finally and perhaps most crucially, the kairos concept derives for Tillich from the New Testament sense of “the fullness of time.” In each kairos the “Kingdom of God is at hand” ; for Christians, the unique kairos is “the appearing of Jesus as the Christ.”³⁶

Being grasped by a kairos moment, then, involves both destiny and decision, both gift and choice. “Being” is merely “given” ; it is fate. Meaning is also “given,” but it must be chosen — it is destiny and freedom. According to the interpretation offered here, the kairos aspect of the experience of meaning points to the freedom of the divine : true meaning cannot be forced. But as chosen and embraced, meaning becomes vocation. It becomes truth for a particular social group at a particular time and place. Tillich does not always explicitly link kairos, meaning, and vocation in this way, but implicitly the connection is clear. He does link them in a brilliant essay which provides a summary of his theology/philosophy of history : “The Kingdom of God and History” (1938), collected in *Theology of Peace*, edited by Ronald H. Stone. In that essay, after setting forth how he intends to proceed toward the construction of a Christian interpretation of history, Tillich offers a description of human groups, the constituent parts of human history. He writes : “Historical groups are all those human groups which on the one hand have the power to exist and to maintain their existence, and on the other hand are the bearers of a definite system of values for the establishment of which the historical group feels responsible. This sense of responsibility is expressed in the form of consciousness of a special vocation.” This sense gives meaning and value to existence. “Human freedom implies the consciousness of meaning and value. Accordingly, every historical group feels its existence to be in a special way meaningful and filled with value. No imperialism could develop apart

32. ID., *The Interpretation of History*, p. 129.

33. ID., *The Protestant Era*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1957, p. 155.

34. James Luther ADAMS, “Tillich’s Interpretation of History,” in *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, Revised and Updated, ed. by Charles W. KEGLEY, New York, The Pilgrim Press, 1982, p. 341, 342.

35. TILlich, *The Interpretation of History*, p. 152 ; cf. p. 140, 166-167 ; cf. also ID., *Vorlesung Über Hegel*, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 1995, p. 111 : “The concept of essence not only passes over into a kairos-concept, as it was developed methodologically by Hegel later — but the concept of essence is itself built up from a kairos-concept” (my trans.).

36. ID., *The Protestant Era*, p. 46-47.

from such a sense of value or of vocation.”³⁷ He then speaks of how, for Christianity, the Kingdom of God is the “symbolic expression of the ultimate meaning of existence,” transcending all conditioned meanings ; it is the aim of history, transcending all conditioned aims. These conditioned meanings and aims contain something of the ultimate meaning and aim, but are subject to “demonic” distortions.³⁸

As further developed in this essay and elsewhere by Tillich, the Christian theology of history focuses at once on Christ and the church. On the one hand, Christ is understood as the embodiment and manifestation of both ultimate meaning and divine power. As Tillich observes, “in Christ [...] Christianity sees the appearance of the ultimate meaning of life in history.” Likewise, “Salvation is actualized in history whenever a demonic power in social or individual existence is overcome by the divine power which has become visible in Christ.”³⁹ Tillich does not elaborate on these claims in the essay referred to. One could speculate that he means that the divine power is manifested in Jesus’ exertion of power through power purified of coercion — power through the renunciation of power. Furthermore, power, says Tillich, “cannot exist without a meaning, in the name of which it is a power.”⁴⁰ We might interpret power’s meaning here in terms of two vocations : that of Jesus and, derivatively, that of the church. Jesus’ calling — at the “right time” (*kairos*), that is, at the intersection of the various social forces of the ancient world — is to embody “salvation,” to embody “the Kingdom of God,” at a particular time and place in human history. The church is the community of those “called” to extend this embodiment into world history, regarding the *kairotic* moment of Jesus’ call to be normative, though in different historical circumstances. This perspective is summarized by Tillich in the following passage :

History is carried by those groups and individuals who represent in their existence a meaning which belongs to the ultimate meaning and is unified and purified in it. As far as salvation is the latent meaning of history, those are its real bearers who incorporate and represent in themselves this meaning, either in expectation or in reception. The spirit of salvation radiating from those personalities and groups is the power which again and again overcomes the demonic self-destruction of historical existence. If we call the latent community of those people the invisible church, we must agree with the New Testament in asserting that the church is the real bearer of history. This is not a claim for the empirical churches, but a demand upon them.⁴¹

It appears that Tillich is assuming that the various meanings and vocations given to and embraced by individuals and groups over the centuries can be “unified” and

37. ID., *Theology of Peace*, Louisville, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990, p. 29. Cf. also *Systematic Theology*, III, p. 349-350.

38. ID., *Theology of Peace*, p. 33-35. Cf. Tillich’s reference to “a demonically distorted experience of a *kairos*” under Naziism in the 1930s, and to the use of “the Cross of the Christ” as the criterion against this : *Systematic Theology*, III, p. 371.

39. ID., *Theology of Peace*, p. 36, 37.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

“purified” to become parts of “the ultimate meaning of history,” which is invisible and suprahistorical.⁴²

CONCLUSIONS

What conclusions do we draw, then, about Tillich’s view of Spiritual power in human history ? As was suggested earlier, for Tillich divine creative power provides an inner directedness toward the goal of world history — a goal that we can now identify as the Kingdom of God. This is no straight-line, evolutionary tendency ; it is a kind of pressure that is constantly being thwarted by human freedom. Though “world history is the fragmentary actualization of salvation,” Tillich hastens to insist that the Kingdom of God will never be fully actualized in history ; the claim that such can happen is religious utopianism, “which should be regarded as quite untenable.” Progress is made, if only in a negative sense, when “destructive forces are overcome.”⁴³ Similarly, Tillich postulates that love is a fundamental life-force. “Life is being in actuality and love is the moving power of life [...] being is not actual without the love which drives everything that is towards everything else that is. [...] Love is the drive towards the unity of the separated.”⁴⁴ It seems fair to conclude that Tillich never fully clarified the relationship between love and meaning ; both serve a reconciling function. Tillich does see the need for a distinction between creative and saving or spiritual power, the former being universal, the latter being sporadic or time-bound. Spiritual power, he says, overcomes the ambiguities of power, and he poses the question : “The question then is, how does spiritual power work, how is it related to physical and psychological power, and how is it related to the compulsory element in power ?”⁴⁵ As we have seen, he has difficulty answering his own question.

We might attempt an interpretive construction as follows. Moments arise in history when individuals or groups are given opportunities to act in specific ways that foster the goal of “bringing in God’s Kingdom.” These opportunities must be chosen and embraced, or they can be lost. Choices for God’s Kingdom can be of two sorts. If compulsion is renounced altogether, the renouncing group becomes in effect a “church” ; it thereby renounces a political role, since, tragically, political realities require an element of compulsion. “Churches” give a foretaste of the Kingdom, but cannot conquer the demonic potentialities of freedom. However, secondly, in politics, kairos and vocations can be given and embraced that fragmentarily move history forward. In this context, Tillich’s positive evaluation of unifying forces, and his critique

42. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 42, 43, 44. Tillich makes a revealing “aside” in *Systematic Theology*, III, p. 354 : “It is astonishing to notice how sudden and radical the breakdown of progressivism was, so radical that today many (including this writer) who twenty years ago fought against the progressivistic ideology now feel driven to defend the justified elements of this concept.”

44. *Id.*, *Love, Power, and Justice*, p. 25. One should add that, for Tillich, being drives toward individualization and toward “the reunion of the separated.” Cf. *Id.*, *The Protestant Era*, p. XXI ; *Id.*, “Being and Love,” in *Moral Principles of Action*, ed. by Ruth N. ANSHEN, New York, Harper, 1952, p. 663.

45. *Id.*, *Love, Power, and Justice*, p. 9.

of the destructive aspects of nationalism, lead him to an unexpectedly positive view of empire-building (in spite of its potential for destructiveness). He writes : “The ambiguity of empire-building is fragmentarily conquered when higher political unities are created which, although they are not without the compulsory element of power, are nonetheless brought about in such a way that community between the united groups can develop and none of them is transformed into a mere object of centered control.”⁴⁶

Divine Spiritual power, then, is a reconciling power, mediated through human spirit and freedom, but not reducible to human choices. There is always a givenness, a destiny, that must be embraced and affirmed in human choices. Faith affirms, further, that the ultimate destiny of history cannot finally be thwarted ; God’s Kingdom will prevail. But this will not be accomplished fully *within* history ; the tragic quality of human freedom cannot be overcome in time and space. Vocations are relative to circumstances, but they contain an element of ultimate meaning. They can and must be criticized. Christians use the criterion of spiritual power and meaning as exemplified in Jesus as the Christ in judging other kairoi. According to Christian faith, the various lines of historical influence intersected in the person of Jesus in such a way that he embodied decisively — in a kairotic moment — the ultimate meaning of history.⁴⁷

The vocation of the churches is to carry that meaning forward in all of history’s varying circumstances. God’s creative power is omnipresent in nature and history. But God acts further by giving meaning (destiny, vocation) in specific ways to specific social groups. These meanings must be comprehended and embraced by those groups. To the extent that they are successful in doing so, they assist in bringing in God’s kingdom.

Thus Tillich’s God is not an intervening God ; but his God is not a powerless God either — not just offering abstract ideals (in the manner of humanism), but giving powerful vocations (that may or may not include coercion, depending upon circumstances) that move individuals and groups to act. The demonic aspects of these vocations must be continually criticized according to criteria drawn from the normative kairos and vocation of Jesus as the Christ.

46. *Id.*, *Systematic Theology*, III, p. 387.

47. It may illuminate Tillich’s views to say that for him Jesus just as well represents the New Meaning as the New Being. The former captures the combination of present and future aspects, and may point toward a different Christology, discussion of which lies beyond the scope of this paper.