Paul Tillich’s 1936 Travel Diary

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Paul Tillich’s 1936 travel diary, written during his first return to Europe after his forced exile in America, reveals his reflections on socialism, capitalism, Russia and America. It also affords a glimpse of his personal life, his tastes and his pleasures. As a Marxist socialist obliged to live in the world’s foremost bastion of capitalism, he had to be very discreet about his attraction to Stalin’s Russia. This article attempts to uncover his true loyalties.

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Introduction

From April 11th to September 19th 1936 the famous German theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965) undertook a trip through England, Scotland, Holland, Belgium, Luxemburg, France, Italy and Switzerland, thus avoiding his native Germany, from which the Nazis had expelled him three years earlier in response to the publication of his Marxist manifesto Die sozialistische Entscheidung (The Socialist Decision), which he did not allow to be translated into English during his lifetime for fear that it would bring an end to his career in American universities, just as it had done for his career in Germany. He wrote his travel diary as a present for his second wife, Hannah, little suspecting that she would have it translated and published in English five years after his death.

Tillich’s Thoughts on America

Tillich had enjoyed three years of a brilliant career as a professor of theology at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City when he began his trip in Europe. One would think that his diary would give him the opportunity to express his gratitude to Americans for having saved him from the Nazis. On the contrary, he mentions Americans only twice. On page 33, writing about his trip on the ocean liner bringing him to England, he says: “Unfortunately, on this trip the American element predominated over the French.” In other words, he would have preferred to be surrounded by Europeans and not be reminded of the nation in which he was destined to live.

His second mention of Americans concerns the different fates of Negroes in America and France: “We go to a French Negro nightclub. Different from Harlem. The Negroes here are not being persecuted for their race” (Tillich, 1970, p. 96). Not only does he prefer white Europeans to white Americans, but he also prefers European Negroes to American Negroes.

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Tillich’s Thoughts on Russia

Even more surprising than Tillich’s obvious lack of admiration for America is his enthusiasm for Stalin’s Russia. He writes: “We talk agreeably about Russia” (Tillich, 1970, p. 29). In another incident, he mentions a conversation with a friend named Adolf: “I agree with Adolf—as with no other person—on all essential program points. He feels very positive about Russia” (Tillich, 1970, p. 47). While talking about another friend, he says: “If the war should devastate Western Europe, he would like to see Russia inherit the lead position” (p. 93). Tillich makes no opposition to this sentiment. A Russian friend, a religious socialist like Tillich, tells him that “he is delighted with the current developments in Russia” (p. 111) and Tillich finds no reason to disagree with him. Another acquaintance offers Tillich help in arranging a trip to Russia, and Tillich is thrilled (p. 118).

What exactly were the “current developments in Russia” that so inspired his interlocutor? Stalin’s Gulags were already in place, and the Ukrainian famine caused by Stalin’s forced collectivization of agriculture had killed between 3 and 12 million people. The Russian government tried its best to keep both the Gulags and the famine secret. They succeeded with hiding the reality of the Gulags until Nikita Khrushchev revealed their existence to the world in 1956.

The Ukrainian famine, called Holodomor in Ukrainian, was first disclosed in the West in 1933 by a young Welsh journalist named Gareth Jones who had been an eye-witness in the Ukraine. His account was published in the Berliner Tageblatt, The New York Evening Post and The Chicago Daily News.

How then is it possible that Tillich and other Communist sympathisers were unaware of the horrors of Stalin’s Russia? Was it just naïveté? Was it out of loyalty to the international Marxist movement? Or was it sheer ignorance? In Tillich’s case, it could have been simply ignorance, since, in the most shocking sentence of his travel diary, he admits: “I feel like a barbarian because I never read” (Tillich, 1970, p. 77). Someone who never reads should not be expected to know very much about current events in the world. I actually believe Tillich when he says that he never reads anything, since he does not once mention any book that he might have read during this six-month trip. Certainly the many hours spent in trains and ships afforded him ample time to read numerous books, but there is never any reference to a single book that could have kept him company during his travels.

Tillich’s Pleasures

Almost every page contains the name of the wine or champagne that Tillich has just drunk. He was a man who enjoyed pleasures, which made him very different from American Puritans. Twice he visits Parisian brothels (Tillich, 1970, pp. 99, 109). It is rather amazing that he makes such a confession, since the audience of this diary will be his second wife, Hannah. But the two of them had an open marriage and thus it is not all that surprising. If his licentious life-style had been known to Americans, his career would have been jeopardized.

Tillich’s Prophecies

Tillich made two major prophecies concerning the future of the world, one of which turned out to be false while the other was proven to be true. His false prophecy concerned Europe. He thought that it was inevitable that the capitalist countries would become socialist, whereas in actual fact the socialist countries became capitalist in 1989.

He was, however, right in his prediction for America’s future. He famously said: “It is going to be bad here,
very very bad”. He foresaw America’s decline, decay, decadence and devastation. Like the members of the Frankfurt New School of Social Research, he emphasized the dehumanizing effects of capitalist competitiveness. The land of Trump is characterized by paranoia, violence, vulgarity, ignorance, xenophobia, increasing inequalities, racism, anti-Semitism and endless warfare. The injustices, absurdities and cruelties of advanced capitalism are more and more obvious, even to the less educated. Now neo-liberalism is threatening the very survival of the planet Earth with its obsession about unending and limitless economic growth with the consequent destruction of the natural environment.

My Covenant with Tillich

On March 28, 1965, I gave Tillich an essay that I had written for him about a Beatific Vision that I had had in August 1963. I wanted the world’s most famous theologian to have an opportunity to express his opinion about whatever metaphysical significance this vision might have. To my great surprise, he thought that it meant that I was the Parousia. This is of course an insane idea.

For Catholic theologians, the major criterion for recognizing the Second Coming of Christ is that He would be a man who has never had any sexual experience and whose mother is a virgin. For fundamentalist Protestant theologians, the way to identify Christ when He returns is much easier: He will fall out of the sky without a parachute. Tillich would have rejected both of these scenarios.

For Tillich, the most important aspect of his new Christ would be that he would be a socialist because “Jesus was the first socialist.” The problem is that I have never shared his illusions about Marxist socialism and have always refused to collaborate with Communists. Tillich would have been disappointed. In 1974, while crossing the Atlantic on a Russian vessel, I learnt that Tillich had communicated with Russian Communists about his demented idea that I had fulfilled his eschatological expectations. With time, I have been able to forgive Tillich for making my life the centre of a Marxist intrigue simply because I recognize that he was mentally ill.

My theory that Tillich thought of himself as a twentieth century John the Baptist, preparing a highway for our God in the desert, is confirmed by a passage from Kirche und Kultur: “We cannot do what is decisive. What we can do is to prepare the way. It has always been thus and will remain thus for every era that aspires to have a revelation” (quoted in Béland, 1995, p. 154). It is obvious that Tillich was hoping that God would reveal Himself to someone else and that this person would communicate with him. Elsewhere, Tillich speaks about receiving a promise from God.

In the last sermon of his life, given at Harvard on March 28, 1965, four hours after his encounter with me, Tillich said: “We hope for the fulfillment of our work, often against hope, because it is already in us as vision and driving force” (Tillich, 1990, p. 186). By banishing me from their meetings, their writings and their thoughts, Tillich scholars are preventing Tillich from achieving the fulfillment of his work. They are too proud to admit that a Harvard undergraduate understood Tillich’s theology better than they ever did. They are condemning Tillich to oblivion, which is what he feared the most. They are also silencing a voice that pleaded for socialism in an era when the United States needs some sort of socialism more than ever. All that matters to them is their careers, which might be jeopardized if they acknowledged that I have revealed Tillich’s well-kept secrets. They worship Mammon, and not God. These so-called theologians take comfort in Nietzsche’s diagnosis that God is dead and thus participate in the act of deicide.
Censorship

Both the Association Paul Tillich d’expression française and the North American Paul Tillich Society have told me that I am **persona non grata** and that I am prohibited from expressing my ideas about Tillich at their meetings. I embarrass them. They cannot dispute what I say about Tillich because it is all very well documented, and it is true. I attended the annual meeting of the North American Paul Tillich Society in San Diego in November 2019 and managed to ask onerous questions such as: “How is it possible to admire a Marxist socialist like Tillich without admiring the Marxist socialism of countries like the Soviet Union, East Germany and North Korea?” “As an American, have you no conflict in your conscience when you admire a Marxist theologian while your government has spent the past seventy years going around the world killing Marxists?” No one could answer my questions.

*The Harvard Divinity Bulletin* will not allow me to advertise my book *What Rough Beast*, in which I give an account of my meeting with Tillich. Harvard finds this story too scandalous and will take no responsibility for a Harvard professor involving a Harvard student in an international Marxist intrigue. This is a form of censorship and is unworthy of a university that should be proud of original, creative intellectual research. My book contains the essay that I gave Tillich. It is important since it is the only published account of a Beatific Vision that exists in all of modern world literature. Tillich scholars, however, just do not have the intellectual acumen necessary to recognize it as such. As Tillich said, the priestly tradition has always stood in opposition to the prophetic tradition.

Conclusion

It is indeed indicative of the intellectual impoverishment of the United States today that I am forced to send my articles about Tillich to China in order for them to be published. A professor at Harvard once said that Tillich was a dangerous man. No one could understand in what way he could be dangerous. Now we know.

References