

---

# PAUL TILLICH AND THE COURAGE TO BE IN THE TIME OF COVID

保罗·田立克与  
直面新冠病毒大流行的勇气

---

ANTON JAMNIK 安当·亚姆尼克

## ABSTRACT

One of the attempts to establish the foundations of contemporary ethics is Paul Tillich's existential analysis and evaluation of "the courage to be." In humanity's encounter or rather existential confrontation with the threat of nonbeing, revealed in the categories of space and time, finitude and freedom, and especially in experiencing guilt, absurdity, fear, doubts and other limitations of being, there is an opportunity for asking a question about the meaning of life and searching for sources of power in order to accept and overcome all these challenges. In the acceptance of being-itself the courage to be is born in a person, when they, realising and accepting their own finitude, overcome its limits and open themselves up to Infinity. This infinity of being-itself is not something abstract but is realised as Love, from which a person gets the courage to live in love, power and justice. As Pope Francis emphasizes: "Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travellers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all." (Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 2020, no. 8)

Key words: God, ethics, ontology, courage, fear, anxiety, justice, love, pandemic, Covid 19

## INTRODUCTION

Why does God allow so much suffering, especially for the weakest, the most innocent, children ... why coronavirus? To be honest, we must admit that we are not able to answer this question; despite all justifiable and sensible partial answers this question cannot be answered, since it opens us into the intangible mystery which is God. Ultimately, human beings are beings who, with their hearts and spirits, cannot be happy with only things they can know and understand, no matter how beautiful and exquisite they are (Richard, 2009, p. 123-125).

“God is no dwelling entity among other dwelling entities. There is no such God, according to Tillich. However, on the other hand, God is also not the complete opposite, separate from all beings, but God as being-itself is the one who gives all beings their existence and preserves it.”

“A rock pile ceases to be a rock pile the moment a single man contemplates it, bearing within him the image of a cathedral!” (A. de Saint-Exupery). So how do we contemplate “this rock pile – the coronavirus pandemic,” the cathedral in ruins? Are we contemplating the image of a cathedral or are we increasing the chaos? Do we accept inspiration from the Infinite Architect, the Creator of the planet Earth Cathedral and the

infinite galaxies? Answers to these questions will be searched for with the help of Paul Tillich, who in his philosophical and theological writings talks about the vulnerability and fragility of human beings, and with his insight into the whole truth of human beings’ existence proposes an original foundation for the ethics of love, justice and power, or how to maintain the courage to be (Tillich 2009), despite the threats and the finality of being (Stegner, 2009, p. 91-105). Tillich is relevant to the current situation, since his main emphasis on the courage to be lays the existential foundations for an ethics of resilience (Bayer, 2009, p. 18-20).

By the ethics of resilience, I mean an ethic that enables people to be resilient. Resilience, as I use this term here, and its characteristics and factors, are explained by Bojan Žalec, who summarizes the concept as follows:

“The appropriate metaphor for resilience is not a robust tank or an oak, but a lithe tree or grassy plant that bends in strong winds, but over time returns undamaged to its previous state. The main characteristics of resilience are, in addition to durability, flexibility as well as appropriate capability of transformation” (Žalec, 2021, p. 140).

Resilience alone, however, is not the highest ethical norm:

“With the consideration of change and preservation, however, we have already touched the normative aspect of resilience. To assess the desirability or undesirability of conservation and change, and thus resilience, we need to refer to certain values. At the level of society, the leading civilizational values, such as human dignity, freedom, humanity and responsibility for the environment or creation are essential here. Resilience is also closely linked to justice. Normally, resilience is desirable only if it is

compatible with the above-mentioned values and principles” (Žalec, 2021, p. 141).

#### FAITH AS THE SOURCE OF LOVE, POWER, AND JUSTICE

To understand the terms in the title of this section - and their ontological aspects - we need to understand properly Tillich's understanding of God as being-itself (Ger. *Gott als Sein selbst*). This is Tillich's central theological concept. God as being-itself is both transcendent and immanent in relation to existing entities. God is no dwelling entity among other dwelling entities. There is no such God, according to Tillich. However, on the other hand, God is also not the complete opposite, separate from all beings, but God as being-itself is the one who gives all beings their existence and preserves it. Therefore, everything that lives, lives from the accommodating hands of God. Creation is not a one-time act, but God is constantly creating. (Wenz, 2002, p. 115) In particular, with regard to human being, it is very important for our discussion that God, i.e. being-itself, is the source of human courage to be (Tillich, 2009, p. 193ff).

Ontological discussion of the concepts of love, power and justice tries to reach to the depths of their initial meaning and thus re-evaluate them, placing them where they actually belong (Tillich, 1960, p. 1-18). In this way, human beings' faith, the fact that they accept being accepted, is concretely realised, and at the same time acquires distinctively communal dimensions in a specific social situation. There is endless relevance in Tillich's argument in which he particularly stresses that love, power, and justice are intrinsically linked and complementary, which is why any emphasis on only one of these aspects is wrong and leads into irregular relationships (Taylor, 2009,

p. 189-208). Love is the vital power of every living being, the motor, leading from separation to unification. Renewed unification presupposes the separation of that which fundamentally belongs together (Danz, 2009, p. 187-189).

The power of love is not something which is added to the finite reality, it is the constitutive element of all life, it means the renewed unification of that which at this moment is egocentric, individual, but originally belongs to each other in co-existence. It is a personal happening, achieving a unity in every individual; the greater the unity in the individual, the more this person will be open toward relationship with another, the less space there will be for anxiety and fear of nonbeing (Tillich 2009, 32ff), appearing as estranged being (ibid. 85; Richard, 2009, p. 126-127). This personal happening is closely linked to interpersonal encounters; they enable one another. Love binds individuals, it is the foundation of unity, the way towards original unity which was destroyed by human beings' estrangement from their own essence (Tillich, 1960, p. 18-35; Bayer, 2009, p. 27-28). Love is the foundation and not the negation of power. Love and power are a unified happening, involving both separation and renewed unification, overcoming the constant threat of nonbeing. The intrinsic power of being, each person's final freedom, responding to the constant risk and threat of nonbeing, all these reflect the tragedy of human existence on the one hand, and on the other its greatness (Taylor, 2009, p. 192-199).

But then another question arises: “When can the power of being be in conflict with love?” This happens when power negates the purpose of love, the renewed unification of something separated, the constant renewal of communities. Love fights against the final separation— independence based on self-sufficiency—and

thus against everything that opposes the renewed unification in itself, as well as the renewal of human relations of unity (Richard, 2009, p. 131-133). Therefore any form of separation that remains mere separation is against love, as it wishes to build on its own power. If there is no love calling for renewed unification, for the fundamental unity of these individual powers, which have their foundation in being-itself, then separation leads into absurdity which surrenders to the threat of nonbeing in its denial of the real threat of resisting it (Schweiker, 2009, p. 144-150). The power of existence in relation to being-itself offers the possibility of a new quality of human relationships, in which love leads to the renewed unification and new unity (Tillich, 1960, p. 35-54).

#### JUSTICE AS A FORM OF POWER AND LOVE

According to Tillich, love and power are closely linked to justice. Justice gives form to the encounter of two beings but justice cannot define this encounter in advance. Every moment contains several possibilities, every relationship involves risk and human beings' vulnerability. A false, unjust relation of two powers can destroy life (Taylor, 2009, p. 189-208). Every act of justice requires risk and audacity (Thatamanil, 2009, p. 299-301). The foundation of justice is love. If love implies a tendency toward renewed unification of something separated, then justice is the form of this tendency, this movement. The ontology of love is Tillich's fundamental answer to the question of justice. As justice is a form of renewed unification of something separated, it needs to include both separation (uniqueness, individuality), without which there is no love, and renewed unification, in which love is realised. Justice is a form of the power of being, a form of love. If love does not

include justice, it may get lost in a confused self-resignation which destroys the one who loves and the one who receives this love (Tillich, 1960, p. 54-72).

“An ethical act is a way of life, an expression of resilience, in which the courage to be is realised in love and justice, thus in a new quality of social relationships and in confrontation with a great many of the hardest questions of human existence.”

Love does not do more than what is required by justice, but it is always love which remains the last principle of justice. Love unites again, justice safeguards that which should be unified. Justice in its final meaning is creative, and creative justice is a form of love. The ontological definition of love, power, and justice is the foundation of Tillich's understanding of ethics (Richard, 2009, p.123-127). “What is great and beautiful has been questioned from the very beginning.”

#### FINAL THOUGHTS ON THE COURAGE TO BE IN A TIME OF PANDEMIC

The specific situation in which humanity has found itself in the Covid pandemic challenges us to ask the question about the meaning of our existence in a new way, to ask ourselves how we will survive all those fears and threats. In my opinion it is of vital importance to take this situation seriously and not to run away from a necessary confrontation with our reality, as this

would only produce greater fears and anxieties (Thatamanil, 2009, p. 288-303). Pope Francis in *Fratelli Tutti* (2020) gives us an excellent example how to connect love, power, and justice during this time of pandemic. Each of these three points resonates well with Tillich's perspective:

- *Confrontation with pandemic*: "Aside from the different ways that various countries responded to the crisis, their inability to work together became quite evident. For all our hyper-connectivity, we witnessed a fragmentation that made it more difficult to resolve problems that affect us all." (Pope Francis, 2020, no. 7) Recall Tillich's understanding of "separation."
- *Critics of neo-liberal paradigm in the economy*: "Yet the brutal and unforeseen blow of this uncontrolled pandemic forced us to recover our concern for human beings, for everyone, rather than for the benefit of a few." (Pope Francis, 2020, no. 33). Like Tillich, Pope Francis understand the necessity of "renewed unification."
- *Universal aspiration of brotherhood*: "Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travellers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all." (Pope Francis, 2020, no. 8). Such a dream, as Tillich understood, can be realised only through the grace of love, empowered for justice.

The ethics of resilience is formed by realising one's finitude and limitations (Tillich 2009, 85), and at the same time by the even more important fact that in any human being there are

traces of the Infiniteness, the traces of the absolute Being which presents a person with the courage to be despite all fears. Faith means responding with freedom to accept their acceptance (ibid. 167ff), from both Divine love and one's fellow human beings, as Paul Tillich emphasises. (Danz, 2009, p.185-188). This is no longer an abstract theoretical perspective, but it should, if embraced really truly and sincerely, be reflected in the personal life story of every individual and his or her social circumstances (Stegner, 2009, p. 100-104). An ethical act is a way of life, an expression of resilience, in which the courage to be is realised in love and justice, thus in a new quality of social relationships and in confrontation with a great many of the hardest questions of human existence.

Žalec shows how theological virtues (faith, hope, love) are the source of human resilience. People can only be resilient if they are virtuous (Žalec, 2021, p. 141-142). This means that they can only be resilient if they are ethical. In addition, human resilience implies the authenticity of a person (Ibid., p. 143). Someone can only be resilient if they live authentically. In his texts, among which I highlight *The Courage to Be* in particular, Tillich illuminated the foundations and origins of human resilience, authenticity and ethics, and their interconnectedness. Resilience and ethics are crucial in our fight against the covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, I believe that Tillich's analyses and findings are particularly important in today's situation, and that they deserve attention and discussion.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Research Programme Ethical-religious Grounds and Perspectives of the Society and the Religious Studies in Context of Education and Violence (P6-0269) is financed by the Slovenian Research Agency. This article was published with the support of the mentioned programme. I thank the agency for the support. I also thank Professor Bojan Žalec for his valuable comments and suggestions.



ANTON JAMNIK, Theology Faculty of Ljubljana –  
University Ljubljana, Archdiocese Ljubljana



## REFERENCES 参考资料

- Bayer, O. (2009). Tillich as systematic theologian. In Russell Re Manning (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich* (pp. 18-37). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Danz, C. (2009). Tillich's philosophy. In Russell Re Manning (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich* (pp. 173-189). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jamnik, A. (2017). Medkulturni dialog ima temelje v verskem pluralizmu [Intercultural Dialogue Has Its Foundations in the Religious Pluralism]. *Theological Quarterly* 77(2), 279-287.
- Pope Francis. (2020). *Encyclical Letter Fratelli Tutti of the Holy Father Francis on Fraternity and Social Friendship*. Rome: Dicastero per la Comunicazione – Libreria Editrice Vaticana. Retrieved from [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html)
- Richard, J. (2009). Tillich's analysis of the spiritual situation of his times. In Russell Re Manning (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich* (pp. 123-138). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schweiker, W. (2009). Theology of culture and its future. In Russell Re Manning (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich* (pp. 138-152). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stegner, M. A. (2009). Faith and religion. In Russell Re Manning (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich* (pp. 91-105). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, M. L. (2009). Tillich's ethics: between politics and ontology. In Russell Re Manning (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich* (pp. 189-208). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thatamanil, J. (2009). Tillich and the postmodern. In Russell Re Manning (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich* (pp. 288-303). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tillich, P. (2009). *The Courage to Be*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
- Tillich, P. (1960). *Love, Power, and Justice – Ontological analyses and ethical applications*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Wenz, G. (2002). Paul Tillich. Fraglichkeit und Sinnerfüllung. In Peter Neuner and Gunther Wenz (Eds.), *Theologen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (pp. 109-123). Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Žalec, B. (2021). Resonance as an integral part of human resilience. *XLinguae* 14(3), 139-150.