SECOND EDITION

THE COURAGE TO BE

PAUL TILLICH

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY PETER J. GOMES

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INTRODUCTION

Few theologians have been able to capture the imagination of the modern world as Paul Tillich. He was one who, in the middle of the twentieth century, spoke convincingly to the crisis of spirit and mind that hovered over the religious life of thoughtful people. Described by an admirer as the "Apostle to the intellectuals," Tillich, through his many writings—first in German and then in English—provided a new theological vocabulary with which to address the profound disquietude provoked by modernity's confrontation with death and meaninglessness. Admired by his fellow theologians as a "theologian's theologian," he was read by an ever-widening and appreciative circle of lay people for whom much of Christian theology and philosophy had proven itself inaccessible and irrelevant. By creating a new and dynamic theological vocabulary with which to examine the contemporary crisis of anxiety, Tillich liberated theology from the academy and gave it both a new audience and a new relevance in contemporary discourse.

Paulus Johannes Tillich was born in Germany in 1886 and educated at the Universities of Berlin, Tübingen, Halle, and Breslau. Ordained a minister in the Lutheran Church in 1912, he taught theology in universities in
Germany until 1933, when he was deprived by the Nazis of his professorship. Admired by American colleagues, he was invited by Reinhold Niebuhr to teach at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, where he remained from 1933 until his appointment in 1955 as University Professor at Harvard. He left Harvard for the University of Chicago in 1962, where he taught until his death in 1965.

Of all of his many writings, none better captures the essence of Tillich’s thought than The Courage to Be, published in 1952. He had long been well known and appreciated within the specialized world of theology and philosophy, but with the publication of this book he burst upon the wider cultural scene and became something of an American intellectual celebrity. The book became an indispensable classic, without which serious discussion about the meaning of life could not be undertaken, and it is virtually impossible to think of another book published in the twentieth century in the field of religion which had the immediate impact of The Courage to Be. No college reading list was complete without it, and its very title entered into the lexicon of theological conversation.

The book began as a set of lectures given under the auspices of the Terry Foundation at Yale University. The terms of the foundation required that the lectures concern themselves with “religion in the light of science and philosophy,” and Tillich chose as his subject the concept of courage because he was convinced that
it was the place in which theological, sociological, and philosophical problems converged in such a way as to provide a useful analysis of the human situation. "Courage," he wrote in the opening paragraph, "is an ethical reality, but it is rooted in the whole breadth of human existence and ultimately in the structure of being itself. It must be considered ontologically in order to be understood ethically." This was the device with which he would examine modernity's most consuming crisis: meaninglessness and its discontents.

His lectures could not have come at a more paradoxical moment in American culture and religious life. The postwar recovery was well under way, and with it the rise of a cultural optimism in a country which had both won the war and defeated the depression: material prosperity was an ambition and a fact of life. America was now the defender of the free world, and with that fact came a sense of self-satisfaction and security. Religion participated in this boom culture with a marked increase in church attendance and an epidemic of church-building programs across the country, which *Time* magazine called America's religious "edifice complex." Billy Graham was filling America's largest public spaces with his crusades, Norman Vincent Peale was perennially on the best-seller list, and Bishop Fulton J. Sheen was almost as popular as comedian Milton Berle in the new leveling medium of television. At Harvard University, the new young president Nathan Marsh Pusey was busily reviving the moribund Divinity School with an infusion of
new millions from John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and new and vigorous theologians. Tillich himself would join that faculty in 1955, and on March 16, 1959, his picture would grace the cover of *Time* magazine. Religion was experiencing one of its periodic flourishings in American life and, this time, it appeared to be here to stay.

Tillich, however, was not quite so persuaded of the depth or permanence of America’s latest revival of religion. In the middle of the religious boom of the 1950s, in an article entitled “The Lost Dimension in Religion” in the June 14, 1958, issue of the *Saturday Evening Post*, then the most popular magazine in America, Tillich wrote, “If we define religion as the state of being grasped by an infinite concern we must say: man in our time has lost such an infinite concern. And the resurgence of religion is nothing but a desperate and mostly futile attempt to regain what has been lost.”

Tillich was not easily impressed by expressions of popular piety and the building boom in churches, and it was to the subject of what had been lost, the so-called “lost dimension in religion,” to which he turned in *The Courage to Be*.

In our age of intellectual specialization and the marginalization of religion from thoughtful society, and of compelling ideas from much of religion, it is difficult to imagine a theologian being taken seriously by anyone other than other sympathetic theologians. Paul Tillich, however, was taken very seriously by the culture at large, as well as by theologians. The publishers of *Time*
and the *Saturday Evening Post* knew what they were doing when they gave over their pages to Tillich, for people were prepared to hear what he had to say even if they did not always understand it. He was, after all, the incarnation of the German “Herr Doktor Professor.” Tall and elegantly disheveled, he spoke ponderously and with a heavy German accent, theology’s answer, as it were, to science’s Albert Einstein: an eminent intellectual who managed to capture the popular imagination.

From his platform as a professor at New York’s Union Theological Seminary during the 1930s and 1940s, Tillich gained his reputation as a critical and articulate philosopher of culture, appealing to new audiences across the country eager for more than the popular preaching of the day. As a new generation of teachers of religion and philosophy—who had heard and read him in their own student days—went to fill appointments in America’s colleges and seminaries, they introduced their students to the work of Paul Tillich: by mid-century he was a ubiquitous figure on the college lecture circuit and beginning to have an impact.

After the publication of his 1952 Terry Lectures as *The Courage to Be*, Tillich became a genuine intellectual celebrity, with his book appearing on practically every college’s reading list. It was the stuff of college bull sessions on religion: preachers and professors borrowed freely from it, and it became what one might call an “iconic” book, that is, a book that everyone has heard of and most felt that they ought to have read. My first en-
counter with it was in my freshman year at Bates College in 1961, when it appeared on the reading list of Religion 101. Paul Tillich had been my professor's professor, and he never got over it; an entire theological generation would feel the same.

When I was invited to prepare this introduction to a new Yale University Press edition of Tillich's book, I was delighted. I knew that I had read *The Courage to Be*, or had at least been examined in it many years ago, but, truth to tell, I could not remember a thing about it except, of course, the intriguing notion of fortitude and existence in what has to be one of the best titles ever for any theological book. I was therefore obliged to read *The Courage to Be* again, this time with the eyes of a post-modern apologist for belief in the closing shadows of the twentieth century, and I wondered if I would find it dated, irrelevant, incomprehensible, or, in short, a period piece. To my surprise and delight, nothing could have been further from the case.

At the end of the twentieth century, despite all of the superficial signs of religious vitality in American life and culture, where presidential candidates are obliged to boast of their intimacy with Jesus Christ, the nagging clouds of doubt and meaning continue to rain on our religious parade. In an era of unprecedented economic growth and material prosperity, where more people have more faith in the chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank than in the president of the United States, there remains at the heart of the culture a grave