

# There are Other Worlds than These: Exploring Stephen King's *The Gunslinger* and the Theology of Paul Tillich

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This article is a practical teaching case study intersecting Stephen King's *The Gunslinger*, the first novel in King's epic sci-fi/fantasy *Dark Tower* series, with key elements of Paul Tillich's theology. Stephen King is the literary selection in this case study for two reasons: 1) King is one of the United States' most beloved popular writers. 2) King has deep existential-theological themes throughout his literary corpus, but especially in *The Dark Tower* series, which have not been previously analyzed in the manner presented here. Paul Tillich is the featured theologian in this study for two reasons: 1) Tillich was once a prolific public intellectual in the United States.<sup>1</sup> 2) Tillich is a particularly dense thinker, so his theology is useful to test my assertion that difficult theological concepts can be approachable for seminary students.

The study interweaves intellectual observations about the intersection between Stephen King and Paul Tillich with practical reflections from teaching this subject to a class of seminary students. Theory and practice are interlaced throughout. While this study is not strictly an analysis of theological themes in *The Dark Tower* series, heretofore uncharted intellectual territory is being explored with a practical aim befitting the teaching vocation.<sup>2</sup>

1. Volf and Croasmun note Tillich's *Courage to Be* was one of the "New York Public Library's Books of the Century" in 1995. See Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun, *For the Life of the World: Theology that Makes a Difference* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2019), 40.

2. Douglas E. Cowan's 2018 book exploring explicitly theological themes in Stephen King's writings does not address *The Dark Tower*, choosing instead to focus on the works King is most popularly (superficially?) known for. Since this study uses the first installment of King's non-horror magnum opus to demonstrate his relevance for theological reflection, I am choosing a different approach than Cowan, who writes on King's theological relevance through his horror works. Cowan notes in the introduction of his book: "We will focus on [King's] horror fiction, rather than epic fantasy such as *The Eyes of the Dragon* or his magisterial *Dark Tower* series, or his ventures into the crime procedural... His work in other genres may certainly include scenes that frighten the audience in order to advance the narrative, but King's scary stories are written explicitly to frighten his Constant Reader... Because of this, the dark theologian's god-talk is read most clearly through the lens of his horror fiction." See Douglas E. Cowan, *America's Dark Theologian: The Religious Imagination of Stephen King* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 9.

The mainline institutionalized church may be declining, but that does not mean spiritual-religious questions have lessened. In fact, popular literature is an excellent place to begin if interested in religious questions outside the organized church.

## Exploring the relationship between popular literature and systematic theology for the church and the world

One way to emphasize the public focus of systematic theology is to explore the relationship between theology and popular literature.<sup>3</sup> The mainline institutionalized church may be declining, but that does not mean spiritual-religious questions have lessened. In fact, popular literature is an excellent place to begin if interested in religious questions outside the organized church. If St. Augustine was right when he wrote of the human heart's restlessness until it finds God, then God can surely be encountered outside of established church literature.<sup>4</sup> The heart's desire for unification with God can be expressed richly even if not in an explicitly Christian manner.

Part of this process means being willing to risk breaking out of traditional disciplinary boundaries, thereby embracing interdisciplinary studies. Pedagogue Cathy Davidson writes,

[I]nstitutions should foster deep, integrated learning, synthesis, and analysis across the borders of disciplines, including by cultivating the difficult and increasingly

3. I am here defining popular literature as literature read by a wide variety of people, and not principally by academics or specialists within a certain field.

4. Augustine, *Confessions, 2nd Edition*, trans. F.J. Sheed (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006), 3.

necessary skill of collaborating with those whose expertise and cultural background may be vastly different from one's own.<sup>5</sup>

Integrating popular literature with systematic theology is a fruitful example of creative, interdisciplinary work. Popular writers often deal with theological questions, and exploring this relationship is fruitful because it connects theological educators with the world outside of the seminary. Students who study this intersection, in turn, need not worry about the real-world application of theological studies: theological studies are profoundly world focused when they are applied in relation to literary works read and beloved by many people.

### Exploring Stephen King

Stephen King is not explicitly Christian. King describes himself as a "fallen away Methodist," and belongs to the "spiritual, but not religious" crowd, meaning his work is further useful for discussing in relation to Paul Tillich, a systematic theologian who sought to make the Christian message tenable to those outside the church.<sup>6</sup> Exploring the intersection between King and Tillich allows for focusing outside of the church and outside of the academy, even while teaching in institutions related to the academy and the church. King's themes in *The Gunslinger* of questing, centering one's existence around a single goal, and exploring one's place in relation to the Ultimate resonate with Tillich's theology.

In a 2002 article for *The Midwest Quarterly*, Greg Smith describes how academic circles tend to see popular writers such as Stephen King as "hacks and marauders against which both the bulwark of the great literature and the public itself must be defended."<sup>7</sup> Smith believes King has not achieved recognition among literary critics for three chief reasons: the films made from King's books are "awful;" he is continually thought of as a Gothic Horror writer, a genre not considered worthy to be in the category of great literature; and he is "the bestselling novelist of all time"<sup>8</sup> although "pigeonholed as just a trashy horror writer."<sup>9</sup>

Yale University's Harold Bloom furthers this line of thinking by calling the National Book Association's decision to bestow a lifetime achievement award on King in 2003 "extraordinary, another low in the shocking process of dumbing down our cultural life."<sup>10</sup> This advances a common notion that King's stories are not worth serious intellectual engagement. Smith states further, "The

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big deal in relation to Stephen King where academics are concerned, interestingly enough, seems not to be whether his books are dangerous, but instead whether they're good."<sup>11</sup>

Here, perhaps, is the gift popular writers offer the world, accessibility and enjoyment by a broad range of people, Harold Bloom's frustrations notwithstanding. Stephen King considers himself to be a popular novelist and extols the virtues of popular novelists in the introduction to the revised version of *The Gunslinger* thusly:

I think novelists come in two types... Those who are bound for the more literary or "serious" side of the job examine every possible subject in light of this question: *What would writing this sort of story mean to me?* Those whose destiny (or ka, if you like) is to include the writing of popular novels are apt to ask a very different one: *What would this sort of story mean to others?* The "serious" novelist is looking for answers and keys to the self; the "popular" novelist is looking for an audience. Both kinds of writer are equally selfish. I've known a good many, and will set my watch and warrant upon it.<sup>12</sup>

By focusing on what stories might "mean to others," King is avoiding self-focused "naval gazing" and attempting to reach the broader public with his stories. Anyone with a passion for teaching surely can relate to striving for broad appeal rather than overly specialized debates that cannot be appreciated by non-specialists. If teaching theologians and pastors are to be public intellectuals for the sake of building up the body of Christ, then there is a helpful intersection between King's focus on popular writing and the need for theology to reach a broad public outside the academy.

*The Gunslinger* is the first of eight novels comprising King's magnum opus, *The Dark Tower* series.<sup>13</sup> A mix of fantasy, horror,

5. Cathy N. Davidson, *The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 232.

6. Cowan, *America's Dark Theologian*, 204.

7. Greg Smith, "The Literary Equivalent of a Big Mac and Fries?: Academics, Moralists and the Stephen King Phenomenon," *The Midwest Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (2002): 330.

8. Smith, "The Literary Equivalent of a Big Mac and Fries," 332.

9. Smith, "The Literary Equivalent of a Big Mac and Fries," 335. Smith notes that a small number of literary critics argued for King's literary reputation among critics.

10. Harold Bloom, "Dumbing down American readers," *The Boston Globe*, September 24, 2003.

11. Smith, "The Literary Equivalent of a Big Mac and Fries," 331.

12. Stephen King, "On Being Nineteen and a Few Other Things" in *The Gunslinger, Revised Ed.* (New York: Plume Books, 2003), Kindle edition, 100, 104.

13. *Dark Tower* is perhaps best thought of as one long novel, but we are only focusing here on *The Gunslinger* due to space limitations in the present article, and time restrictions during teaching of the subject

western, and science fiction, *The Gunslinger* defies easy classification into one principle genre, thus being a literary example of Cathy Davidson's stress on the importance of interdisciplinary work. The work begins with one of King's most iconic sentences: "The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed."<sup>14</sup> The story centers on Roland Deschain, a Gunslinger who is the last of his kind on an existential quest for the Dark Tower. Reaching the Tower is Roland's *raison d'être*, and Roland's all-consuming devotion to the Tower has strong religious themes. In this book, Roland pursues the Man in Black, his chief foe who has answers regarding the Tower, aided by Jake, a boy he encounters after a bout of nearly deathly dehydration.

Roland's quest leaves many innocent bystanders dead, and continually tests Roland's resolve to devote all of his energy to finding the Tower. "It was not fair to ring in innocent bystanders and make them speak lines they didn't understand on a strange stage. *Allie*, he thought, *Allie was at least part of this world, in her own self-illusory way. But this boy...this Goddamned boy...*"<sup>15</sup> Eventually Roland lets Jake fall to his death in the name of his quest to pursue the Man in Black for the sake of reaching the Tower. The existential-religious themes (hinted at here) abounding in *The Gunslinger* make the work accessible and popular material for introducing the rich, nuanced theological concepts of Paul Tillich to seminary students.

### Exploring Paul Tillich<sup>16</sup>

Just as Stephen King's corpus is too vast to address in its entirety in one sitting, so the same can be said for Paul Tillich. Therefore, I had to be highly selective when teaching Tillich's thought to a class of students who in some instances had never been exposed to his ideas before. Tillich was an apologetic theologian who sought to bring the Christian message to a world that had progressed beyond traditional Christian language and concepts. Although a thoroughly modern thinker who eschewed supernaturalism and the wonder world of the Bible, Tillich had a strong grasp of the Christian tradition and was able to speak to those outside the church because of his rootedness within the faith he sought to explain to the modern world.<sup>17</sup> Tillich's concepts of religious symbols and faith as a matter of ultimate concern are some of his richest contributions to modern theology, yet are nuanced and

examined here. See Bev Vincent, *The Road to The Dark Tower: Exploring Stephen King's Magnum Opus* (New York: New American Library, 2004), 311-315, for a persuasive argument using King himself that *The Dark Tower* deserves to be called King's magnum opus.

14. King, *The Gunslinger*, 249.

15. King, *The Gunslinger*, 1254.

16. This reading of Paul Tillich incorporates ideas I first articulated (in regards to ultimate concern) in Brach S. Jennings, "The Courage to Be: Paul Tillich's Existentialist Theology of the Cross in Relation to Martin Luther," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 57, no. 3 (2018): 211-218.

17. Tillich's extensive grasp of the Christian tradition is seen in his lectures published posthumously in Paul Tillich, *The Complete History of Christian Thought*, ed. Carl Braaten (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968).

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often difficult for students to grasp at first. My teaching focused on approaching accessibly these aspects of Tillich's thought and how they related to *The Gunslinger*.

When we address the meaning of symbol in Tillich's thought we are probing the nature of religious language in general. For Tillich, religious language is everyday language that is transcended. Language matters in and of itself due to its relation to the ability of human beings to rationalize and discern our actions in the world. The fact that we can ask the ontological question of why there is being over non-being requires language to do so. Language is foundational to the deepest existential journeys of life. When religious language is understood as symbolic language, general language is transcended to the level addressing the deepest meaning of life. Tillich understands religious symbols in the following way:

Every religious symbol negates itself in its literal meaning, but it affirms itself in its self-transcending meaning. It is not a sign pointing to something with which it has no inner relationship. It represents the power and meaning of what is symbolized through participation. The symbol participates in the reality which is symbolized. Therefore, one should never say "only a symbol." This is to confuse symbol with sign. Thus it follows that everything religion has to say about God, including his qualities, actions, and manifestations, has a symbolic character and that the meaning of "God" is completely missed if one takes the symbolic language literally.<sup>18</sup>

A symbolic statement is neither literal nor non-literal; it is more than literal. Religious language resides in the more than literal dimension of human speech.

Tillich's notion of symbol de-literalizes religious language and retains the mysteries at the heart of religious faith. If religious lan-

18. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 9.

guage is taken literally, it becomes absurd and unintelligible from the viewpoint of modern people. When the symbolic character of religious language is affirmed, the richness of faith is opened up anew for the current world, and one enters into the story of God's love for all creation with awe and wonder, without the language being a stumbling block if it is expected to be taken literally.

The Tower is the principle religious symbol in *The Gunslinger*. Obviously, if taken literally, the story would be absurd from a positivistic perspective. Instead, the Tower can be seen to represent the center of all reality, the structure that holds all worlds together. Bev Vincent writes aptly about the Tower: "It is the nexus of all possible universes, and was originally supported by Beams powered by an unending supply of magic. Lacking faith in the persistence of magic, men replaced it with rational—but mortal—technology."<sup>19</sup> Roland Deschain is on a quest to find the Tower in order to repair the damage done to it. The entirety of all worlds hangs in the balance. Can the Tower and Roland's questing after it help students approach Tillich's concept of the theological symbol? Yes, if one is willing to leap into this fantastic universe and explore religious themes from there. Tillich becomes a guide in the intersection between King and systematic theology because Tillich de-literalizes the Christian tradition and reclaims the centrality of myth as the home of religious language and thought.

Ultimate concern, the other essential pillar of Tillich's thought for seminary students, determines the entire being of the systematic theologian. Tillich believes it is impossible for a theologian to be detached from her/his/their work. Rather, "he is a theologian to the degree to which his existential situation and his ultimate concern shape his philosophical vision."<sup>20</sup> The words ultimate concern "state unambiguously the character of genuine faith, the demand of total surrender to the subject of ultimate concern."<sup>21</sup> For the systematic theologian, ultimate concern and meaning are found in God as the Ground, meaning, and aim of being.

Ultimate concern is Tillich's phrase for what is traditionally called "faith." Where does one's faith lie? In God, or in something else? That is a central question for Tillich, as he mines the Lutheran understanding of the First Commandment—"you shall have no other Gods before me" (Exod 20:2/Deut 5:6, NRSV). According to Tillich, everyone has an ultimate concern. Examples abound such as nationalism, capitalism, love interests, a football team, or a quest that one believes with the entirety of one's existence has to be fulfilled in order for one to be fully human. This last example was Roland Deschain's ultimate concern and cross to bear in *The Gunslinger*. Finding the Dark Tower consumed Roland to the point of being willing to sacrifice Jake Chambers, the boy Roland came to love deeply. Even Roland's love for Jake was not enough to cause Roland to halt his quest for the Tower. Roland lets Jake fall to an unknown abyss, with Jake saying just before he dies,

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"Go then. There are other worlds than these."<sup>22</sup> On the one hand, there is something undeniably admirable about someone being willing to sacrifice anything and everything in devotion to their ultimate concern. Conversely, should human life be sacrificed in such fanatical obedience to one's faith? These are lessons Stephen King teaches us about ultimate concern in *The Gunslinger*.

### Teaching King and Tillich to seminary students

My first time teaching this subject was in a *Science Fiction and Spiritual Imagination* course at McCormick Theological Seminary, Chicago, Ill.<sup>23</sup> I was given one three-hour class session to cover my topic. The class was comprised of twelve students (a majority of whom are pursuing the Master of Divinity degree), two professors, and one Educational Assistant. Since my audience was primarily future pastors, I tried to shape my teaching toward accessibility for the church rather than primarily for the academy. This was a somewhat difficult task, given the depth and nuance of Stephen King's writing and Tillich's thought.

I chose to begin with Tillich rather than King, in order to give the class an explicitly *theological* flavor. This was in keeping with my goal of sound theological reflection combined with accessibility for the wider world. I read an excerpt from Tillich's *You are Accepted* sermon, which I hoped the class could link to Roland Deschain, and how he could not "accept the fact that he was accepted" because his quest for the Tower was all defining and all consuming.<sup>24</sup>

22. King, *The Gunslinger*, 2821.

23. While *The Dark Tower* series admittedly fits the Fantasy genre better than Science Fiction, I used it for teaching in the Science Fiction course because King incorporates elements from multiple genres into the series as a whole. One could argue, though, that a stricter sense of Science Fiction is found in Book 3 of the series, *The Waste Lands*, rather than *The Gunslinger*, because of the talking train Blaine the Mono. However, in the case of Jake Chambers, *The Gunslinger* addresses parallel worlds as well as death and resurrection. Jake dies in New York City, ends up alive in Mid-World where he meets Roland, and (supposedly) falls to his death with his famous sentence to Roland, "Go then. There are other worlds than these" (see n. 22). Bev Vincent observes, "Jake Chambers holds the record for the number of times someone dies in the *Dark Tower* series: three." See Bev Vincent, *The Road to the Dark Tower*, 229.

24. Paul Tillich, "You Are Accepted," in *The Shaking of the*

19. Bev Vincent, *The Road to the Dark Tower*, 2.

20. Tillich, *Systematic Theology I*, 25.

21. Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1957), 3.

I did not ask the students to read any of Tillich's works ahead of time out of consideration to their already hefty reading load for the course. Many of them had not been exposed to Tillich before, although a majority of the students had heard of him. Thus, to introduce Tillich's theological thought, I relied on audio-video clips of Tillich found on YouTube focusing on Tillich's notions of "symbol"<sup>25</sup> and "ultimate concern."<sup>26</sup> Some students found Tillich's thick German accent difficult to understand at times, but we had a fruitful discussion about the highlighted themes from Tillich.

The class related to Tillich's concern for people outside of the established church and agreed that the Christian story must be translated for those who do not take its symbols and themes for granted. The task was then to explore religious symbols in *The Gunslinger* that could be used to explain the Christian story through an existentialist lens for people outside the church. As Tillich says, "religious symbols open up the experience of the dimension of this depth [i.e., the level of God] in the human soul."<sup>27</sup> The question was if Tillich's theology was applicable to popular literature as seen in Stephen King's *The Gunslinger*.

Shifting to Stephen King, I began with a video clip from an interview he gave on CBS This Morning in 2014 addressing his so-called "dark reputation."<sup>28</sup> It is important to dispel the myth that King is a "trashy horror writer" and to make the case that King is writing stories that deserve to be called literature in the vein of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien.<sup>29</sup> Dispelling this myth gives justification for teaching King in academic settings, while still emphasizing his broad and wide ranging appeal.<sup>30</sup> The CBS This Morning interview is a short and accessible clip to present King first and foremost as a *writer*, and secondarily a writer who often writes within Gothic Horror. King writes in *Danse Macabre*, "I am a writer by trade, which means that the most interesting things that have happened to me have happened in my dreams."<sup>31</sup> That observation is in the context of King's rejecting (at that time) the validity of writing his autobiography in relation to a book about the horror genre. However, it is significant that King

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claimed himself to be a "writer by trade" without the modifier "horror." Also, since King considers his magnum opus to be the *Dark Tower* series, specifically *not* falling within the Gothic Horror genre, making the claim that King first and foremost should be considered a *writer* and then a writer who often writes within Gothic Horror, is warranted.

To further emphasize the goal of defining King more broadly than a horror writer, I asked the students to read the entirety of *The Gunslinger (Revised Edition)*. I chose this volume because it is the shortest of the *Dark Tower* books and I wanted the students to have the experience of reading a King novel from start to finish if they had not already done so. Even though the *Dark Tower* series is best thought of as one continuous tale, at least students read a chunk of the tale in its entirety. *The Gunslinger* contained enough material for a 1.5-hour discussion interweaving King and Tillich.

King admits *The Gunslinger* is not a particularly well-written book. He began the work at 19 and revised it in 2003.<sup>32</sup> Even though we used the Revised Edition, *The Gunslinger* lacks King's nuanced and detailed writing that can be seen in the later books of the series. The class commented that the book was phrased awkwardly in places, and that Westerns (even of the supernatural/parallel universe type) are difficult to relate to from the outset. The class became convinced through the discussing the book that King does not deserve to be pigeonholed as only a horror writer. Even if the class was not thrilled with Roland's never-ending devotion to the Tower, they were able to relate to Jake's innocence and desire for love from Roland.

The class held a spirited debate about *The Gunslinger* as literature and its religious themes for people outside of the church. Since I started with YouTube clips of Tillich, I asked the class to keep Tillich at the forefront of their thoughts about the religious

*Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976), 161-162.

25. "Paul Tillich on Christian Faith and Symbolism," YouTube video, 10:01, posted by "AnglicanO8," April 27, 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-UzPI3gKn\\_4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-UzPI3gKn_4)

26. "Interview of Paul Tillich Part 1," YouTube video, 8:19, posted by "gerstners," October 28, 2008, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1P9\\_9eXEJ6I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1P9_9eXEJ6I)

27. Paul Tillich, "The Nature of Religious Language" in *Theology of Culture*, ed. Robert C. Kimball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 58-59.

28. "Author Stephen King on new movie and his dark reputation," YouTube video, 6:43, posted by "CBS This Morning," September 24, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-LBHRSNEZA&t=221s>

29. Smith, "The Literary Equivalent of a Big Mac and Fries," 335.

30. Comparing King to J.R.R. Tolkien is apt, since Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* was one of King's chief influences when he wrote *The Gunslinger*. See King, "On Being Nineteen and Other Things."

31. Stephen King, *Stephen King's Danse Macabre* (New York: Everest House Publishers, 1981), 25.

32. See King, "On Being Nineteen and Other Things."

themes in King. The linkage worked in terms of debating about the validity of Roland's quest and what he sacrificed working toward his goal. The class was not happy with Roland's dogged pursuit of the Tower at the (supposed) expense of Jake's life. The passion and excitement of the class debate (the members debated mostly with each other with only minimal prompting from the facilitator) is evidence of King's ability to grip his readers with his writing, even if the readers are not happy with a character's actions.

After the class debate about *The Gunslinger*, we turned to a half-hour excerpt of Stephen King's speech for the National Book Festival in 2016.<sup>33</sup> This video prompted students to think about the validity of theologians and pastors as public intellectuals. King has achieved a high measure of celebrity status in an over forty-year career. How does he use that fame and notoriety? While he could retreat to his home in Bangor, Maine, and not engage the broader public beyond his books, King is instead an enthusiastic supporter both financially and by word-of-mouth of public libraries and the role they play in promoting literacy in the United States. This visible support of libraries and literacy is why King deserves to be called a public intellectual. He connects to Paul Tillich as a public intellectual, through Tillich's 3-volume sermon collection and his short books *Dynamics of Faith, Love, Power, and Justice*, and *The Courage to Be*.

Christians are storytellers and can learn from professional storytellers such as Stephen King how to engage the wider culture in accessible and fruitful ways. They can also learn from Tillich who was explicit about writing for the church as well as the academy, and whose popular works show his broader appeal beyond specialists. Future pastors, and theology students in general, need to be public intellectuals in order that Christianity can be expressed amid a culture that no longer takes the Christian story for granted. Intersecting King and Tillich is a way to propose seminaries should be active in the life of the wider community rather than academic havens disconnected from the wider world around them.

We now turn to two limitations of this project. The first limitation is the two authors studied. While King enjoys wide appeal as a writer, and Tillich is generally known by theological students, not all students will enjoy learning about these figures. It is the job of the instructor to present subject material in an engaging and accessible manner, but student appreciativeness of the topic cannot be guaranteed. If students come with the preconceived notions that King writes gruesome horror stories they are not interested in and that Tillich is reserved for the smallest of niche audiences in the academy, the teacher will likely need to swim upstream to relate to the class. Parker Palmer's words are of help when addressing this first limitation: "Passion for the subject propels that subject, not the teacher, into the center of the learning circle—and when a great thing is in their midst, students have direct access to the energy of learning and of life."<sup>34</sup>

33. "Stephen King 2016 National Book Festival," YouTube video, 56:39, posted by "LibraryOfCongress," November 21, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRD7JJLPeIM&t=2728s>.

34. Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner*

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The second limitation is the social locations of the authors studied. King and Tillich are white, heterosexual males. White, heterosexual males have dominated academic and public discourse far too often, so why should they be studied yet again? A similar question was raised by a student in the Science Fiction course. This student challenged what he perceived as Stephen King's toxic masculinity having to do with Roland Deschain as a protagonist who would be at home in a Western film, as well as King's speech patterns and stories about average people from the National Book Festival interview that could be perceived as tailored to white, heterosexual men. While liberation theologians of color such as James Cone draw from Paul Tillich's work, why integrate Tillich and a white, male popular writer? A hopefully helpful response is noting how King has enjoyed widespread popularity in the United States and the world, and he is an example of how popular writers incorporate religious-existential questions into their work. These questions are useful for the church to explore as we seek to communicate the Christian story today, social locations of the authors notwithstanding.

Having considered these limitations, I now turn to what I believe is this project's validity. Teaching Stephen King and Paul Tillich shows how the Christian story can be understood in relation to the wider secular culture. In particular, King and Tillich force those of us accustomed to the Christian church's symbols and rituals to consider them for non-Christian contexts. Although religious themes abound in Stephen King's novels, he is not explicitly Christian and poses a challenge and opportunity for dialogue to Christian theologians. Although Paul Tillich is a Christian theologian, he writes in language that does not take Christian symbolism for granted, and certainly not literally. King and Tillich, when studied together, allow for an engaging dialogue about the intersection of popular literature and Christianity today. The dialogue between King and Tillich was a fruitful one,

*Landscape of a Teacher's Life, 20th Anniversary Edition* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 122.

and a dialogue that could have been explored further had there have been several course sessions for the dialogue rather than one three-hour session.

I end this section with the final discussion questions I posed to the class. These questions were designed to encourage student participation and further engagement with the authors presented:

- Can the bridge between popular fiction and theology be made through King and Tillich? Why, or why not?
- Are you inspired to explore more of Tillich's theology as a result of seeing how it can be applied to novels such as *The Gunslinger*?
- Is your interest in Stephen King's novels (re) kindled, when thought of in relation to Tillich's theology?

## Conclusion

This case study proposed intersecting Stephen King and Paul Tillich to show the connection between popular literature and systematic theology. Using *The Gunslinger (Revised Edition)* from the *Dark Tower* series allowed for a vigorous discussion with seminary students about the religious-existentialist themes in King by placing him in dialogue with Paul Tillich. This particular dialogue has not been explored before, and a rich opportunity opened up to discuss the relationship between popular literature and systematic theology for the contemporary Christian church as the church relates to wider society today.

King says "I didn't want to write answers. I wanted to write about questions."<sup>35</sup> Paul Tillich re-interpreted the Christian story for questioning and questing secularized people. Neither one takes Christianity for granted. These two authors come from different fields and could never have interacted personally, since Tillich died in 1965, nine years before King released *Carrie*. Whether King has interacted with Tillich's writings or not, *The Gunslinger* still has profoundly existentialist-theological themes. Both authors can show seminary students the importance of never ceasing to ask and live the questions, particularly as people of faith seeking to live that faith anew in the twenty-first century.

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35. Stephen King, *Just After Sunset* (New York: Scribner's, 2008), as quoted in Cowan, *America's Dark Theologian*, 4.