

Article

Kairos and Carnival: Mikhail Bakhtin's Rhetorical and Ethical Christian Vision

Ian Bekker 

School of Languages, North-West University (Potchefstroom Campus), Potchefstroom 2520, South Africa;
Ian.Bekker@nwu.ac.za

Received: 1 February 2018; Accepted: 6 March 2018; Published: 12 March 2018

Abstract: The term *kairos* has been used to mean, alternatively, right timing or proportion in Ancient Greek rhetoric, by Jesus to refer to the Christian eschaton and by Paul Tillich and modern liberation theologians to refer to the breakthrough of the divine into human history. *Kairos*, unlike *chronos*, is an intrinsically qualitative time and implies a consciousness of the present as well as the need for responsive action. This emphasis on action provides the link between *kairos* and virtue, the particular virtue in question being that of prudence (*phronesis* in Greek). The aim of this article is twofold: to highlight and make explicit the connections between the notion of *kairos* and the Russian literary-theorist and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's rhetorical and ethical world, with particular emphasis on his notion of carnival; secondly, to further support a Christian reading of Bakhtin's work by making explicit the connections between his carnivalesque vision and a Christian reading of the ethical importance of *kairos* and its links with incarnation.

Keywords: Bakhtin; carnival; kairos; rhetoric; liberation theology; Paul Tillich; Albert Nolan; *phronesis*; prudence; virtue; incarnation; the grotesque

*In meinen Mauern bauen
sich neue Zeiten auf,
und alle Völker schauen
mit kindlichem Vertrauen
und lautem Jubel d'rauf!
Der glorreiche Augenblick,*

Beethoven (op. 136)

1. Introduction

Traditionally, *kairos* has been opposed to *chronos*, the latter referring to quantitative (measured or ordered) time, the former referring to qualitative time, or special time. From the beginning, there has been a clear link between *kairos* and what we could refer to, following Husserl (1992), as internal time consciousness¹. *Kairos* is an intrinsically value-laden time; in Tillich's words it implies "a consciousness of the present and for action in the present" (Tillich 1957, p. 32). *Kairos* thus implies a sensitivity to the contingencies of a particular context.

The emphasis on action in this quote from Tillich also highlights the fact that there is, very often, an explicit or implicit link between *kairos* and virtue or ethics, the particular virtue in question

¹ Thanks go to Anné Verhoef for pointing out in response to an earlier version of this article that Ricouer makes a related distinction between private time and cosmic time—as discussed in Verhoef and van der Merwe (2015).

often being that of prudence (*phronesis* in Greek; *prudentialia* in Latin; often also referred to as practical wisdom), which is a virtue that is also characterized by sensitivity to context. The link between *kairos* and *phronesis* has been clear right from its Ancient Greek beginnings, very often mediated by the concept of *paideia*, the education of the citizen. More recently, for example, [Benedikt \(2002, p. 226\)](#) attempts to “create an account of *kairos* capable of informing a system of ethics”.

As mentioned in the abstract, the main aim of this article is twofold: to highlight and make explicit the connections between the notion of *kairos* and Mikhail Bakhtin's ethical and rhetorical vision, with a particular emphasis on his notion of carnival; secondly, to further support a Christian reading of Bakhtin's work by making explicit the connections between this carnivalesque vision and a Christian reading of the ethical importance of *kairos* and its links with incarnation.

The next section of this article provides a brief historical overview of the use of the term *kairos*, firstly within the context of the classical world, but secondly with reference to its employment within a Christian milieu, beginning with its use in the Greek New Testament, but placing the most emphasis on the theologian who has more than any other incorporated this concept into modern thinking i.e., Paul Tillich. The section ends with an example of its use in modern liberation theology i.e., as part of the contextual theology of the South African liberation theologian, Albert Nolan.

The article then takes a brief look at Bakhtin's notion of carnival, as famously expounded in his doctoral dissertation, *Rabelais and his World*. Various, often diametrically opposed, interpretations of carnival, particularly from an ethical and political perspective, have arisen since Bakhtin's re-discovery, both within and without Russia, in the second half of the 20th-century. The position adopted here is that Bakhtin's (and thus carnival's) ethics are of an essentially (although implicitly and unorthodox) Christian nature. Given the incorporation of the notion of *kairos* into Christianity right from the beginning (i.e., the New Testament) this allows for, in this last section, a final bringing together of Bakhtin's notion of carnival and a Christian understanding of *kairos*.

2. A Brief History of *Kairos*

Thus saith the Lord, In an acceptable time² have I heard thee, and in a day of salvation have I helped thee . . .

Isaiah 49: 8; Kings James Version. In Ancient Greece, *Kairos* was a god; and, as described by [Sipiora \(2002, p. 1\)](#) this god represented opportunity. As demonstrated by [Tillich \(1957, p. 33\)](#), *kairos* means ““the right time,” the moment rich in content and significance”. More broadly, the concept of *kairos* became “a seminal concept in ancient Greek culture that was strategic to classical rhetoric, literature, aesthetics and ethics” ([Sipiora 2002, p. 1](#)).³

One of the odd aspects of the early, classical use of the expression *kairos* is that its different meanings appear, on the surface, to be somewhat at odds. On the one hand, we have a sense of *kairos* as a force or power that breaks through the expected or the repetitive; it breaks, in particular, through *chronos* or mechanical time. It also explicitly assumes (or demands) human agency. In the words of White (1987, p. 13), it is “a passing instant when an opening appears which much be driven through with force if success is to be achieved”. It is, moreover, something that is not predictable and that requires a special sensitivity to the contingencies of the immediate context; it is a force for dynamism and change. In the writings of ancient rhetoricians, such as Isocrates and Gorgias, *kairos* is associated with the use of language for particular times and particular purposes and deals directly with an ability to adapt and adjust, in terms of one’s use of the spoken language in particular, to the context that one is in, to the topic at hand, as well as to the audience being spoken to. Of particular

² καὶ ὥ in the Septuagint; a derivation of *kairos*.

³ It is tempting even at this point to make connections between *kairos* and the work of Bakhtin. This list of topics is almost a perfect catalogue of Bakhtin's interests which the Russian manages to bring together into a relatively stable but open theoretical oeuvre; Bakhtin received a thorough early training in the classics (Clark and Holquist 1984, pp. 30–34).

importance is that the ability to sense the right moment, to sense the *kairos*, cannot be taught on the basis of mechanically-applied, repeatable principles.

On the other hand, *kairos* is also identified with the right proportion and symmetry; concepts that tend to be associated with order, balance, and continuity:

Kairos means also the “right measure” or proportion as expressed, in the saying of Hesiod, “Observe due measure, and proportion (*kairos*) is best in all things.” The same idea is found in the maxims attributed to the Greek Sages, such as “Nothing in excess” (Smith 2002, p. 47).

The appropriateness of an action or utterance to a particular context is one way of thinking about this. As such, *kairos* calls for appropriate behavior in terms of both local and non-local contexts. The latter refer to broader, ‘congealed’, repeatable structures on an ethical, linguistic, and social level, while the former demand a suitable, potentially unique, response to the exigencies of an immediate context. Here we have a connection with the ethical implications of *kairos*. In Isocrates’ system, for example, *kairos* was very closely related to *phronesis* (practical wisdom) as well as *paideia*, the latter referring to the education of the ideal member of the Greek polis. In *Panathenaicus* for example, Isocrates writes that educated people are those “who manage well the circumstances which they encounter day by day, and who possess a judgement which is accurate in meeting occasions as they arise and rarely misses the expedient course of action”.⁴ The ethical dimension of *kairos* and its link to *phronesis* in particular is, then, taken up by Plato (e.g., in the *Phaedrus*) and, perhaps most importantly, by Aristotle.

According to MacIntyre (2007, p. 154) in *After Virtue*, the virtue of *phronesis* in Aristotle’s thinking “comes to mean . . . someone who knows how to exercise judgement in particular cases”. This is later taken up by Aquinas as the Christian virtue of *prudentia* (prudence in English). Of interest here is that, within Aristotle’s ethical system, particularly as provided in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, *phronesis* takes pride-of-place among the virtues: without the practical judgement that is subsumed under the notion of *phronesis*, the individual would not be able to appropriately cultivate the other virtues. Thus, drawing again on MacIntyre’s (2007) analysis of Aristotle’s ethical system, we note that “judgement has an indispensable role in the life of the virtuous man which it does not and could not have in, for example, the life of the merely law-abiding or rule-abiding man. A central virtue is therefore *phronesis*” (ibid., p. 154). Later on this author confirms that *phronesis* is “a virtue the possession of which is a prerequisite for the possession of other virtues” (ibid., p. 183). Here, we have an insistence on a level of independence from (although not a rejection of) abstract principles and rules.

The appropriation of *kairos* by the Christian tradition begins with its use in the New Testament. In Mark 15:1, we read, according to Sipiora (2002, p. 114), the first utterance of Christ: “The time [i.e., the *kairos*] has been fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has drawn near. Repent and believe in the Gospel”. The word *kairos* is used extensively in the New Testament (86 times) and, in particular, is used by Jesus to refer to the Christian eschaton and, as in Ancient Greek rhetoric, is clearly distinct from *chronos* i.e., linear and chronological time. Here again, we have qualitative (and also divine) time and time that is filled with a sense of urgency and meaning. We again have the sense of a force (the eschaton in this case) breaking through the regular and the familiar.

One of the most important consequences of the appropriation of *kairos* into the Christian tradition (via the notion of the eschaton in particular), is its alignment with a particular conception of history, something that distinguishes it from the earlier Greek tradition, which had very little sense of history i.e., the notions of *kairos* and *phronesis* were conceptualized mostly in terms of the actions and education of the individual. We will see that this incorporation of *kairos* into a particular conception of history characterizes the appropriation of the term into modern theology, particularly by Paul Tillich and

⁴ See Page et al. (1929, pp. 391–93).

modern liberation theologians. With this emphasis on history, we also find a link between the notion of *kairos* and that of prophetism, as commonly found in the Old Testament. As confirmed by Tillich (1957, p. 33), therefore, the Greek term *kairos* was also useful in terms of appropriating the “dynamic spirit of Judaism”.

As mentioned, Paul Tillich appropriates the concept of *kairos* as part of a broader philosophy of history, which, as intrinsically Christian, “is more than a logic of the cultural sciences”, and which he characterizes as “a summons to a consciousness of history in the sense of the *kairos*, a striving for an interpretation of the meaning of history on the basis of the conception of *kairos*” (ibid., p. 32). More specifically, for Tillich, “the *kairoi* are those crises in history . . . which create an opportunity for, and indeed demand, an existential decision by the human subject—the coming of Christ being the prime example”. This recognition of “an inescapable responsibility for the present moment in history” (ibid., p. 32) is something that is recognized and elaborated on by later liberation (and *Kairos*) theologians, as discussed briefly below.

Importantly for the purposes of drawing the connections between *kairos* and Bakhtin’s work, Tillich (1936)⁵, makes a distinction between two ‘lines’ of spiritual history in his article entitled “*kairos* and Logos”: the main one connected with Logos, the lesser one connected with *kairos*. With respect to the *Logos*-line he identifies “Kant’s *Critiques* [as] its mightiest expression”. On the other hand, he identifies the *Kairos*-line with “the mysticism and nature-philosophy of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance”, Schelling, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, and “finally as a philosophy of life at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it raises a protest against the methodical formalism of the Kantians”. We will see later that it is into this later *Kairos*-line that Bakhtin can be clearly and relatively unambiguously placed, not least because of his explicit critical stance towards Kantian ethics as well as his celebration of the Renaissance-spirit via his notion of carnival. The essentially anti-Enlightenment stance that Tillich (1957, p. 34) takes up, alongside Bakhtin, is against “the rational conception of reality as a machine with eternally constant laws of movement manifest in an infinitely recurring and predictable natural process. The mentality that has produced this conceptual framework . . . has, in turn . . . made itself into a part of this machine”.

Of relevance too for the current discussion is Tillich’s notion of balance between the necessity of change and becoming, on the one hand, and the preservation of form on the other hand:

Therefore, it is impossible to speak of being without also speaking of becoming. Becoming is just as genuine in the structure of being as is that which remains unchanged in the process of becoming. And, vice versa, becoming would be impossible if nothing were preserved in it as the measure of change (Tillich 1951, p. 181).

This tension between two poles, one static and the other dynamic, is reflected in Tillich’s description of the relationship between the Prophetic Spirit and the Law. This relationship is in turn directly linked to the notion of *kairos*, given that it is only at certain opportune moments (i.e., *kairoi*) that the Prophetic Spirit is able to break “through the barriers of the law” (ibid., p. 370). In his description of the interrelationship between the Prophetic Spirit and the Law, it is interesting to note that the two are clearly dependent on each other; without the Law, the Prophetic Spirit has nothing to break through and, in fact, Tillich insists that it is only as a result of a serious investment in (and commitment to) the Law that the need for something more (for a change) arises:

For maturity is the result of education by the law, and in some who take the law with radical seriousness, maturity becomes despair of the law, with the ensuing quest for that which breaks through the law as “good news” (ibid., p. 370).

⁵ I have unfortunately not been able to find a page-numbered version of this publication. Tillich also (exceptionally) does not italicize the word *kairos* and its derivations in his various publications.

From this perspective, *kairos* need not be considered as the equivalent of a radical form of antinomianism. It is only, in fact, when we resist the need for becoming (when we resist the *kairos*) that we experience a complete breakdown of form: “when the churches rejected this criticism or accepted it in a partial, compromising way, the prophetic Spirit was forced into sectarian movements of an originally revolutionary character” (ibid., p. 370). Important therefore, is that while *kairos* implies the irruption of the new, it does not necessarily imply the complete destruction of the old.

There are a number of further aspects that are central to Tillich’s description of *kairos* and which are relevant to the current discussion. Firstly, from an explicitly Christian perspective, Tillich is committed to distinguishing between what he refers to, on the one hand, as the great *Kairos* (“the moment of time in which God could send his Son, the moment which was selected to become the center of history” (ibid., pp. 369–70)) and, on the other hand, as the relative *kairos*. Important here is that the great *Kairos* (i.e., Christ) stands as a criterion against which the relative *kairos* can be judged. This is because it is clear for Tillich that *kairos* can be both demonically distorted and erroneous. As an example of the first he refers to the rise of nazism in post-WWI Germany: “a demonically distorted experience of a *Kairos* [which] led inescapably to self-destruction” (ibid., p. 371).

With regard to each *kairos* moment being almost inevitably erroneous to some degree, there is a link here with the Greek notion of *phronesis* i.e., with a demand for a form of practical wisdom that cannot be encapsulated in a clear-cut rational or ethical vision: what Tillich calls the Prophetic Spirit, an ability to discern “the “signs of the times”, as Jesus says when he accuses his enemies of not seeing them” (ibid., p. 370). There is also an emphasis on the need for (and the consequences of) practical involvement, which is necessary but, of course, involves risk and error: “it is not an object of analysis and calculation . . . it is not a matter of detached observation but of involved experience” (ibid., pp. 370–71). We will see later that a core aspect of Bakhtin’s notion of carnival is that of involvement; and relatedly of incarnation. Important here too is that the practical wisdom demanded by the *kairos* moment does not exclude analysis and observation, but rather introduces them as an element into the *kairos* moment, as a source of clarification and enrichment. *Kairos* is not, therefore, anti-intellectual or anti-rational. It is meant to indicate a force (and a wisdom) that is, however, beyond (but nonetheless incorporative of) the intellectual and the rational.

The clearly political (as opposed to narrowly individual) implications of *kairos* within Tillich’s system become clear as a result of his analysis of different forms of historical consciousness in the chapter entitled ‘Kairos’ in *The Protestant Era* (Tillich 1957). The prophetic spirit (i.e., the *kairos* historical consciousness) is opposed to different forms of what Tillich (1957) refers to as absolute and relative forms of philosophies of history, all of which exhibit some degree of truth and falsity. The *kairos* historical consciousness combines the true demands of these various forms into what, on the surface at least, appears to be a paradox:

The tension characteristic of the absolute interpretation of history must be united with the universalism of the relative interpretations. But this demand contains a paradox. What happens in the *kairos* should be absolute, and yet not absolute, but under judgement of the absolute . . . this demand is fulfilled when the conditioned surrenders itself to become a vehicle for the unconditional . . . where there is an acceptance of the eternal manifesting itself in a special moment in history, in a *kairos*, there is openness to the unconditional (ibid., pp. 42–43).

Here, we clearly see a tension between the demands of the Kantian-like unconditional and the prophetic (*kairos*) spirit that is sensitive to the demands of the particular time and place. While the unconditional certainly sits in judgement of the ‘moment’ (and is thus incorporated into our response to the ‘moment’), at the same time,

. . . there exists no direct way from the unconditional to any concrete solution. The unconditional is never a law or a promoter of a definite form of the spiritual or social life . . . the truth is a living truth, a creative truth, and not a law. What we are

confronted with is never and nowhere an abstract command; it is living history, with its abundance of new problems whose solution occupies and fulfills each epoch (ibid., p. 51).

Given Tillich's links to religious socialism, it is of course not surprising that Tillich is conceivable, with many provisos, as a forerunner of modern liberation theology (cf. Robbins 2015, pp. 163–65). Unsurprisingly, therefore, *kairos* has become a central term in modern liberation theology, and particularly in the South African 'brand'.⁶ The *Kairos Document*, the central Christian anti-Apartheid manifesto of the 1980s, begins in the following way:

The time has come. The moment of truth has arrived. South Africa has been plunged into a crisis that is shaking the foundations and there is every indication that the crisis has only just begun and that it will deepen and become even more threatening in the months to come. It is the **Kairos** or moment of truth not only for apartheid but also for the Church
[Kairos Theologians \(Group\) 1986](#) .

So-called *Kairos* Theology, as a form of liberation theology, has subsequently spread to other parts of the world, one prominent example being that of Palestine, which now has its own *Kairos Document*.

It also forms part of so-called contextual theology, also a sub-branch of liberation theology, and championed by the South African Dominican priest, Albert Nolan, who was also one of the main architects of the South African *Kairos Document*. Contextual theology, as the name suggests, is a form of theology that is responsive to the demands of the concrete time and place confronted by the Christian. Its clear links with ethics is reflected by its emphasis on orthopraxis as opposed to orthodoxy, something which it shares with many other strands of liberation theology. The links here with the Ancient Greek use of the term *kairos* in rhetoric and the related ethical concepts of *phronesis* and prudence should be obvious. In his book, *Hope in the Age of Despair*, Nolan (2009, pp. 77–79) provides a definition of *kairos* and a description of prophecy that have clear resonances with traditional Greek understandings of *kairos* and the related virtue of *phronesis* as well as with Tillich's notion of the Prophetic Spirit:

"*Kairos* . . . refers to time as a quality. A particular *kairos* is the particular quality or mood of an event. This concept is clearly and succinctly expressed in the well-known passage from Ecclesiastes (3: 1–8):

There is a time for everything;

A time for giving birth

A time for dying

A time for planting

A time for uprooting

Etc.

. . . For the Hebrew, to know the time was not a matter of knowing the hour or the date; it was a matter of knowing what kind of time it was.

. . . This kind of time is not entirely foreign to us. It is particularly meaningful to those who inherit an African culture and even more meaningful when we are involved in an intensified struggle to change the times.

. . . In the Bible the prophet was someone who could tell the time. He (or she) could see what kind of time it was and what kind of action would be appropriate now. The prophets could read the signs of the times, which means they could interpret the *kairos*."

⁶ For more on the incorporation of *kairos* into liberation theology see, for example, Boesak (2015).

In this section, we have briefly reviewed the use of the term *kairos* in both classical times and in terms of its incorporation into the Christian tradition. We now turn to Bakhtin's notion of carnival.

3. Bakhtin's Carnival

The Russian literary critic and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) received a classical training and was thoroughly familiar with Ancient Greek, Hellenistic and Roman culture, literature, and philosophy, as reflected, for example, in his work on the roots of the modern novel. His philosophy of language is, in addition, and in a manner clearly echoing the Ancient Greek and Hellenistic rhetoricians, clearly focused on the concrete utterance rather than on any abstract system underlying it. As with these early rhetoricians, his vision of the utterance includes a clear emphasis on appropriateness to context and audience.

The discovery and publication (and translation into English) of Mikhail Bakhtin's early work (as, for example, contained in the English-language volumes entitled *Towards a Philosophy of the Act and Art and Answerability*)⁷ were of significance in that they were a corrective to the image of Bakhtin as a kind of proto-postmodernist (with distinctly Marxist leanings) that was prevalent in the West directly after his (re)discovery in the 1960s and 70s.

One side-effect of the publication of these early works, with their distinctly (although not exclusively) ethical slant, was a growing appreciation for Bakhtin's neo-Kantian as well as Christian (Russian Orthodox) roots.⁸ Implicit in this Christian interpretation of Bakhtin's ethical vision, and one which connects his critique of Kant to his notion of carnival, is the emphasis on incarnation. We recall from the previous section that Tillich viewed Kant's critiques as the high-point of his so-called Logos-line (as opposed to the *Kairos*-line).

Bakhtin's whole oeuvre is moreover characterized by the motif of finding a (phronetic, prudential) balance between form and dynamics, as dealt with in the previous section with reference to Tillich. When it comes to his linguistics, Bakhtin attempts to find a middle-path between the extremes of individual subjectivism (the production of what is unique and non-repeatable in language) and abstract objectivism (the systemic and static in language). Furthermore, in the notion of genre, Bakhtin finds just such a balance, the genre being an example of "relative typological stability" (Bakhtin 1981, p. 85)⁹ i.e., a relatively stable form that is nonetheless open to change. In his ethics, similarly, while rejecting the abstract, rigid framework of Kantian ethics, he does not fall into a nihilistic form of ethical relativism.

Bakhtin is without doubt most known for his notion of carnival as developed in his book *Rabelais and his World* (Bakhtin 1984). While the book itself is not explicitly a book on ethics—but is rather, on the surface at least, an example of literary criticism—many have drawn ethical, sociological, and political inspiration from it. The exact lessons to be learnt, however, differ from commentator to commentator, and, in this way, reflect different receptions of Bakhtin's work more generally.¹⁰ On the one extreme, carnival can be viewed from within a Marxist perspective: basically as the eruption of radical forces which threaten the status-quo. On the other extreme it can be viewed as an integral function of a more conservative vision i.e., as the necessary mechanism for releasing the pent-up energies and frustrations created by the social order; and thus, part-and-parcel of the maintenance of this same social order.

Importantly, while on the surface, Bakhtin's description of carnival appears to be mainly a critique of the Christian (Catholic) church around the time of the transition from the middle-ages into the Renaissance (and has often been viewed as such), I would argue that it is in fact equally a critique of developments that took place after the Renaissance and, in particular, developments that began in the seventeenth century i.e., with the Enlightenment—a position supported in Charles

⁷ Bakhtin (1990, 1993).

⁸ See, for example, (Mihailovic 1997; Coates 1999; Pechey 2007; Bagshaw 2013).

⁹ See also (Bakhtin 1986).

¹⁰ See, for example, Emerson (1997, pp. 162–206) for a taste of some of the different 'takes' on Bakhtin's carnival.

Taylor's *A Secular Age*.¹¹ With the Enlightenment we find the beginning of "laughter's degradation" (Bakhtin 1984, p. 101). Bakhtin makes explicit reference to Descartes' "rationalist philosophy" and classicism in aesthetics as key examples of this development of a "new official culture [in which] there prevails a tendency toward the stability and completion of being" (ibid., p. 101). Here, we have a clear echo of Tillich's so-called Logos-line as described in the previous section.¹²

Again, as confirmed by Bakhtin (1984, p. 115), "in the seventeenth century an important process was started in all ideological spheres. Generalization, empirical abstraction, and typification acquired a leading role in the world picture". On an ethical sphere, this process, as described by Tillich, reached its apotheosis in the categorical imperative of Kant. In terms of theories of language it has as its height the abstract objectivism of a Ferdinand de Saussure or a Noam Chomsky. Carnival does not, however, imply the polar opposite of such abstraction and generalization. In the ethical sphere, it does not become a nihilist form of ethical relativism, and, on the linguistic level, it is not identifiable with the subjective individualism that Bakhtin contrasts with the abstract objectivism of a De Saussure.

The link between *kairos* and carnival is clear from the very outset. *Kairos* is, from one perspective, essentially a willingness to remain sensitive to the contingencies of time and place, to the peculiarities of context and to suspend abstract, mechanically-applied ethical solutions. It demands as such a willingness to incarnate.¹³ The related concept of *phronesis/prudentia* demands exactly the same from the educated citizen i.e., involvement. Likewise, "these images [of carnival] are opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook" (ibid., p. 3). Moreover, references to time are replete in Bakhtin's description of carnival and the related concept of the grotesque. "Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed" (ibid., p. 10); "the feast is always essentially related to time" (ibid., p. 9); "the relation to time is one determining trait of the grotesque image" (ibid., p. 24). In the following description of carnival time, if we abstract away from the references to feasts and "a festive perception of the world" we almost have a perfect description of the traditional conception of *kairos* itself:

Moreover, through all the stages of historic development feasts were linked to moments of crisis, of breaking points in the cycle of nature or in the life of society and man. Moments of death and revival, of change and renewal always led to a festive perception of the world (ibid., p. 9).

Carnival time is also clearly historical time. Bakhtin refers to "a mighty awareness of history and of historic change" (ibid., p. 25). It is the exact opposite of what (Tillich (1957), p. 33) would consider to be a *kairoic*, a-historical consciousness, one form of which "is rooted in the awareness of what is beyond time. This type of mentality knows no change and no history".

¹¹ Taylor (2007). This recognition should not detract from the fact that carnival is also a critique of (and an improvement on) the medieval world view: "Rabelais' task is to gather together on a new material base a world that, due to the dissolution of the medieval world view, is disintegrating. The medieval wholeness and roundedness of the world (as it was still alive in Dante's synthesizing work) has been destroyed . . . There was destroyed as well the medieval conception of history . . . in which real time is devalued and dissolved in extratemporal categories. In this world view, time is a force that only destroys and annihilates; it creates nothing new. It was necessary to find a new form of time" (Bakhtin 1981, pp. 205–6). The point is of course that the Enlightenment introduced its own set of extratemporal (a-historical) categories.

¹² It is also thus more than suggestive that given that Rabelais was a central figure of the Renaissance, that Tillich should describe the opposite spiritual *Kairos*-line as identifiable with "the mysticism and nature-philosophy of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance" (Tillich 1936). Pechey (2007, p. 162) points out that "in telling the story of the later fortunes of the Gospel ethic Bakhtin distances himself from neo-Platonic elaborations and invokes against these the names of St Bernard of Clairvaux and St Francis of Assisi, those powerful figures of Western medieval spirituality to whom the Rhineland mystics owed so much".

¹³ Bakhtin emphasizes the "obvious sensuous character [of] carnival images" (Bakhtin 1984, p. 7) and, in addition, that carnival always demands involvement and participation (i.e., incarnation and not spectatorship): "carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival . . . Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everybody participates because its very idea embraces all the people" (Bakhtin 1984, p. 7).

Turning to the grotesque as an essential component of carnival we note with Bakhtin, again in relation to time, that with grotesque images we find “both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis” (Bakhtin 1984, p. 24). There is a clearly organic vision underlying the notions of carnival and the grotesque: Bakhtin (1981, p. 168) is at pains to point out that “everything that is good grows: it grows in all respects and in all directions, it cannot help growing because growth is inherent in its very nature. The bad, on the contrary, does not grow but rather degenerates, thins out and perishes . . . the category of growth is one of the most basic categories in the Rabelaisian world”. Of course, the organic is a type (and metaphor) of the “relative typological stability” (i.e., continuity through change) mentioned already.

Of importance here too is Bakhtin’s notion of grotesque realism and its intrinsic connection with the history of laughter. The important thing to understand about grotesque realism (as characteristic of the Renaissance period and as distinguishable from both the archaic grotesque as well as the modern grotesque) is that the critique that it delivers of the ready-made and the polished is not a solely negative one. It has a positive pole (i.e., as a mechanism for growth and transformation) and is in that sense linked to the modern Christian appropriation of the concept of *kairos*. Grotesque realism never devolves into pure (negative) satire of the modern kind. It is essentially a form of “gay relativity” (Bakhtin 1984, p. 11). This emphasis on gay relativity clearly sets the carnivalesque apart from modern-day concerns about the dangers of nihilism attendant upon ethical relativism (and as portrayed in the novels of Bakhtin’s favorite author, Dostoevsky).¹⁴ It would in fact, I believe, be completely incorrect to characterize carnival as a form of ethical relativity, in the same way that it would be an over-simplification to equate the rhetorical and sophistic theories of early Greeks, such as Gorgias and Isocrates, with modern-day ethical nihilism. That carnival is not opposed to ethical idealism is clear from Bakhtin’s work: “the utopian ideal and the realistic merged in [the] carnival experience” (ibid., p. 10); Thus, in fact, a kind of idealism seems inherent to carnival:

The feast had always an essential, meaningful philosophical content. No rest period or breathing spell can be rendered festive per se; something must be added from the spiritual and ideological dimension. They must be sanctioned not by the world of practical conditions but by the highest aims of human existence, that is, by the world of ideals (ibid., p. 9).

It is this ability to reconcile (and balance) the particular, the sensuous, and the changeable with the highest ideals that, I would argue, captures the essence of carnival, and is, I believe, the central motif of Bakhtin’s complete work. In the same way, I would argue, does Bakhtin’s notion of genre, his theory of language, and his ethical system capture the balance between form and dynamics. In the same way the ancient concept of *kairos* captures not a primitive form of ethical relativism, but rather the necessity of sensitivity to the concrete and the historical; to the exercise of the virtue of prudence that cannot be captured by mechanically-applied ethical formulae. The Christian irruption of the divine into human affairs (i.e., *kairos*) captures a similar balance. The relevant irruption does not come to destroy or overthrow the Law, but rather to fulfill it.

¹⁴ Relatedly, Bakhtin emphasized the fact that the laughter and gaiety so characteristic of carnival is in no way incompatible with true seriousness (with tragedy to be more precise): “folk humour . . . was not opposed to all seriousness in general. It was opposed to the intolerant, dogmatic seriousness of the Middle Ages . . . tragic seriousness is universal . . . it is infused with the spirit of creative destruction. Tragic seriousness is absolutely free of dogmatism. A dogmatic tragedy is as impossible as dogmatic laughter . . . Both authentic tragedy and authentic ambivalent laughter are killed by dogmatism in all its forms and manifestations” (Bakhtin 1984, p. 121). There is nothing feckless therefore about carnival laughter. It is compatible with the highest idealism and is not to be equated with purely destructive ethical nihilism.

4. Conclusions

The above discussion has only provided the briefest of outlines of the historical development of the concept of *kairos*, and I believe that its importance for an understanding of Bakhtin's Christian ethos will require a book-length treatment of this development. Of particular importance here would be its connection with *phronesis* and the incorporation and development of the Aristotelian notion of prudence into Christian thought, particularly of the Thomist kind. Given the links explored above between *kairos*, prudence, and incarnation and Bakhtin's notion of carnival in particular, it would also be interesting to see what connections can be made between these concepts and what Richard Kearney refers to as "*the theological hermeneutics of incarnation inspired by the phenomenological retrieval of Christian mysticism and exegesis*" (Kearney 2015, p. 121).¹⁵ The history of the direct uptake of the notion of *kairos* into modern theology¹⁶ also requires further investigation, with preliminary research in this regard, indicating a particularly important role that is played by Heidegger and the incorporation of his thinking about time into 20th-century theology (cf. Murchadha 2013; Schumacher 2015; Delahaye 2016). This all lies in the future, but it is my hope that this article has at least provided a reasonably convincing argument as to the clear similarities between certain key aspects of Bakhtin's thought and the understanding of *kairos* in its various stages of use and development.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Bagshaw, Hilary B. P. 2013. *Religion in the Thought of Mikhail Bakhtin: Reason and Faith*. Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. 1984. *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. 1986. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. 1990. *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. 1993. *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Benedikt, Amélie Frost. 2002. On Doing the Right Thing at the Right Time: Toward an Ethics of *Kairos*. In *Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory, and Praxis*. Edited by Phillip Sipiora and James S. Baumlim. Albany: State University of New York Press, pp. 226–35.
- Boesak, Allan A. 2015. *Kairos, Crisis, and Global Apartheid: The Challenge to Prophetic Resistance*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Clark, Katerina, and Michael Holquist. 1984. *Mikhail Bakhtin*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.
- Coates, Ruth. 1999. *Christianity in Bakhtin: God and the Exiled Author*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Craig-Snell, Shannon. 2011. Kairos in the *chronos*: A Rahnerian View. *Philosophy and Theology* 23: 301–15. [CrossRef]
- Delahaye, Ezra. 2016. About Chronos and Kairos. On Agamben's Interpretation of Pauline Temporality through Heidegger. *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 77: 85–101. [CrossRef]
- Emerson, Caryl. 1997. *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Erdinast-Vulcan, Daphna. 2013. *Between Philosophy and Literature: Bakhtin and the Question of the Subject*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Husserl, Edmund. 1992. *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*. Dordrecht: Springer.

¹⁵ Of relevance here too are Bakhtin's Russian Orthodox roots. Thus Pechey (2006), paraphrasing Lock (2001), claims that "it is the long bimillennial continuity of Eastern Orthodox tradition—its innocence, too, of any Platonic or Aristotelian admixture—that gives Bakhtin the standing ground he needs to correct the Kantian tradition of the West, and that this also explains his kinship with those twentieth-century developments in Western philosophy which have reconnected with premodern thinking". Some of the twentieth-century developments with particular relevance to Bakhtin and incarnation (Bergson, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas) have been recently explored in Erdinast-Vulcan (2013). The theme of reconnecting with premodern thinking is, as is well known, a defining characteristic of Radical Orthodoxy and, in this regard, it is interesting to see how John Milbank has recently shown a growing interest in the Russian Orthodox tradition (Milbank 2009).

¹⁶ Not only by Tillich and modern liberation theology, but also for example by Karl Rahner (cf. Craig-Snell 2011).

- Kairos Theologians (Group). 1986. *The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church: A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa*. Braamfontein: Skotaville Publishers.
- Kearney, Richard. 2015. What is Carnal Hermeneutics? *New Literary History* 46: 99–124. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Lock, Charles. 2001. Bakhtin and the Tropes of Orthodoxy. In *Bakhtin and Religion: A Feeling for Faith*. Edited by Susan M. Felch and Paul J. Contino. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, pp. 97–119.
- MacIntyre, Alisdair. 2007. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Mihailovic, Alexandar. 1997. *Corporeal Words: Mikhail Bakhtin's Theology of Discourse*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Milbank, John. 2009. Sophiology and Theurgy: The New Theological Horizon. In *Encounter between Eastern Orthodoxy and Radical Orthodoxy: Transfiguring the World through the World*. Edited by Adrian Pabst and Christoph Schneider. Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, pp. 45–85.
- Murchadha, Felix Ó. 2013. *The Time of Revolution: Kairos and Chronos in Heidegger*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Nolan, Albert. 2009. *Hope in the Age of Despair*. Bandra: St Pauls.
- Page, Thomas. E., Edward Capps, and William H. D. Rouse, eds. 1929. *Isocrates*. London: William Heinemann, vol. 2.
- Pechey, Graham. 2006. Penultimate Words: The Life of the “Loophole” in Mikhail Bakhtin. *Literature and Theology* 20: 269–85. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Pechey, Graham. 2007. *Mikhail Bakhtin: the Word in the World*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Robbins, Jeffrey W. 2015. Changing Ontotheology: Paul Tillich, Catherine Malabou, and the Plastic God. In *Retrieving the Radical Tillich: His Legacy and Contemporary Importance*. Edited by Russell Re Manning. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 159–77.
- Schumacher, Eric. 2015. Heidegger on the Relationship between Sterēsis and Kairos: Heidegger's Interpretation of Aristotle's Sterēsis as the Basic Movement of Kairological Vision. *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology (IJPT)* 3: 78–84. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Sipiora, Phillip. 2002. Introduction: The Ancient Concept of Kairos. In *Rhetoric and kairos: Essays in History, Theory, and Praxis*. Edited by Phillip Sipiora and James S. Baumlim. Albany: State University of New York Press, pp. 1–22.
- Smith, John E. 2002. Time and Qualitative Time. In *Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory, and Praxis*. Edited by Phillip Sipiora and James S. Baumlim. Albany: State University of New York Press, pp. 46–57.
- Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Tillich, Paul. 1936. Kairos and Logos. In *The Interpretation of History*. Edited by Paul Tillich, Nicholas Alfred Rasetzki and Elsa L. Talmey. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, pp. 123–75.
- Tillich, Paul. 1951. *Systematic Theology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, vol. 1.
- Tillich, Paul. 1957. *The Protestant Era*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Verhoef, Anné, and Willie van der Merwe. 2015. Paul Ricoeur se begrip van transendensie met betrekking tot tyd en narratief. *LitNet Akademies* 12: 196–210.
- White, Eric C. 1987. *Kaironomia: On the Will to Invent*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

