

# VITAL Theology

Helping People Think Theologically

## Contemporary Hero, Tragic Misunderstandings Tillman Story Illustrates Our Confusion about Heroism

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### OUR SCHEDULE

Christmas break is over. We will return to our normal format in mid-January.

**P**at Tillman's story was that of a perfect contemporary hero. A professional football player with the Arizona Cardinals, he gave up a \$3.6 million contract to join the Army Rangers and serve in the war against terrorism. He shunned publicity and led by example.

His death on a battlefield in Afghanistan last April was that of a hero. At least until the Pentagon's neat tale started to unravel.

In December, the *Washington Post* published results of its investigation into Tillman's death. The *Post* found that the Pentagon had covered up Tillman's death by fratricide for a month and that his death was the result of several botched communications, a misguided order to divide his platoon and undisciplined firing by fellow Rangers.

Having taken at least 14 sworn statements that revealed the true cause of Tillman's death, the army, nevertheless, issued a statement on April 30, 2004, that deceptively characterized Tillman as a senior commander whose "voice was heard issuing commands to take the fight to the enemy forces."

But Tillman's platoon knew that was a lie. He commanded only himself, one other Ranger and an Afghan militiaman, under the supervision of others. His fellow Rangers quoted him as saying "Cease fire! Friendlies!" with his last breaths.

Is Tillman still a hero?

We wouldn't be asking the question if we did not live in a time in which it is hard to define heroism. Our culture looks with suspicion on the notion of heroism, say theologians interviewed by *Vital Theology*.

Russell R. Reno, of Creighton University, and Larry D. Bouchard, of the University of Virginia, said that concepts of classical

heroes, celebrity heroes and Christian heroes become terribly confused in a postmodern world.

The media tends to recognize a "need" for classical heroes of virtue and then tries to sell us celebrity heroes, implicitly expecting us to

"Our easy talk of heroes is often fraught with nostalgia and ambiguity, even pandering."

"consume" them, said Bouchard, associate professor of religion, literature and the arts and a Disciple of Christ layman.

Classical heroes represented the excellence of their cultures' orders of virtue. They were exemplars in epics and dramas that both celebrated and critically examined those virtues, said Bouchard. Generally, these were virtues of action, especially in the case of warrior heroes.

## Confusion over Virtues

"We have not for a long time lived in such a classical age," said Bouchard. "We are not at all sure what the virtues are or ought to be, and our easy talk of heroes is often fraught with nostalgia and ambiguity, even pandering."

People grab hold of the word "hero" in an attempt to make sense out of something that may not make sense, he said.

"When we use publicly words like 'hero,' it is kind of awkward," he said. "We're not quite

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sure we know what it ought to mean.”

It is not possible to be a classical hero today, said Bouchard. Instead, someone who is a potential classical hero is turned into a celebrity hero.

“When the Pentagon tries to turn Mr. Tillman into Rambo, they’re trying to turn him into a celebrity hero, implicitly,” Bouchard noted. “I’m not saying that they’re intending to do this. I’m not saying they’re being devious. I’m saying they’re putting him in this pattern.”

Reno, professor of systematic theology at Creighton and a recent convert to Roman Catholicism, said that people want heroes even though it is hard to believe in them in the current cultural environment.

The army’s complicity in developing the heroic portrayal of Tillman’s actions makes it easy for people to say, “Well, what did you expect? That’s pretty much what we thought about heroes,” said Reno.

“The U.S. military played its little game with Tillman, but you kind of almost want to curse them because the guy was very heroic, regardless of these details,” said Reno. “I never admired him for being a commander and I certainly wouldn’t admire him more for being shot by an Afghani Taliban than I would for him to be dying from friendly fire.”

Dying from friendly fire would seem a strong witness to Tillman’s commitment to serve his country without being guaranteed a noble death, he said.

But we live in a “deflationary atmosphere” where we want to deflate ideals and the people who are thought to embody them, said Reno. Even Mother Theresa was not immune to journalistic reports of the limitations of her ministry and her own spiritual struggles.

“This is presented as a kind of I-told-you-so. It’s not really possible to live this spiritually ambitious life,” he said.

The late French philosopher Jacques Derrida was among those who commented on the destructiveness of sacrificing the ordinary needs of human beings to higher goals, Reno noted.

## Critiquing Liberal Christianity

According to Reno, liberal Christianity went through the same deflationary transition in the 20th century. A century that started with the Social Gospel and continued with additional movements aimed at transforming America went awry after the 1960s.

“Through the ’70s and beyond, liberal Christianity in America made a decisive shift toward personal liberation rather than social liberation,” said the Creighton theologian. “Personal liberation is a kind of critiquing of traditional bourgeois morality and eventually of traditional Christian morality. It gives a basis for people to live their lives in their own particularity so that this therapeutic model of liberal Christianity wound up superseding what I would call the social-transformative model of Christianity.”

The therapeutic hero is one who has not let

“Liberal Christianity in America made a decisive shift toward personal liberation rather than social liberation.”

moral standards corrupt his or her life, said Reno.

The gay Episcopal cleric who was appointed bishop of New Hampshire is just such an example, he said. V. Gene Robinson was championed as a hero “because he had thrown off the oppressive traditional morality of heterosexual morality and had heroically sought personal fulfillment,” said Reno.

The adoption of heroes of personal fulfillment and self-acceptance has resulted in the “individualized personal journey” that allows people to refrain from placing many demands on themselves, he said.

In a sharp rebuke, Reno said that liberalism has now transmuted itself into self-realization and self-acceptance on the personal level and has left social transformation at the level of society.

That move allows people to advocate for social transformation without personal transformation, he said. It allows us to advocate for changing inequitable social systems while

not opposing personal greed, for example, because, after all, people need to be sure that their 401(k) benefits are large enough to ensure a comfortable retirement.

"Instead, we're going to change the system," he said. "That allows me to be greedy and righteous at the same time because I'm not saying that greed is bad. I'm saying that we have a system that is bad."

Campaign reform laws are another example of the notion that social structures can be changed without addressing inner motivations, he said.

"Outing hypocrites" is another manifestation of the deflation of heroes, said Reno.

The classic secular hero demonstrated noblesse oblige, the notion that people of privilege are obligated to repay society.

People such as Franklin Roosevelt, Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson were no doubt flawed human beings who enjoyed wielding power, but the general population tended to focus on their contributions to the common good, said Reno.

"Interestingly, President (George W.) Bush is pretty much cut from the same cloth as Franklin Roosevelt," he said. He is from a prominent East Coast family in which public service is promoted as a higher good than personal advancement.

"People have a hard time believing that because our deconstructive suspicion has become so powerful," said Reno.

During the campaign, Sen. John Kerry was subjected to the same critical suspicion, said Reno. Even the media that wished to see him elected had a hard time building him up as a war hero.

"It wasn't just that he had all kinds of mixed motives," said Reno. "It was because we don't like that ideal. We worry that that ideal (of heroism) is just a deception, a fantasy. ... It's an unrealistic ideal that will corrupt people's lives rather than ennoble them."

## Hypocrisy Is Debilitating

If self-realization is contemporary society's most important virtue, then hypocrisy is its capital vice, according to Reno.

"Should I advocate to my students that they redouble their commitment to a life of worship when I, myself, often let my professional ambitions trump going to church?" he said. "Aren't I being a hypocrite when I advocate that to my students?"

The answer is "yes," if one is controlled by the postmodern feeling that hypocrisy is the capital vice, he said. In that atmosphere, it is almost impossible to provide leadership.

"That's the price we pay and it leads to this deflationary environment of moral and social deflation," he said.

Surprisingly, Reno observed, Hollywood appears to be reversing the trend toward a deflationary environment and is more willing to present transcendent heroes than it was

a decade ago. The success of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy is solid evidence, he said.

Some heroes are transcendent, whether they are religious or not, in the sense that they rise above ordinary life. When that kind of story is criticized for being unrealistic, the wise person will note that that is precisely the point, said Reno.

"(Classical) heroes aren't supposed to be realistic. If they were realistic, they would be ordinary men and women," he said. "In other words, (heroes) would be higher up on the pyramid. Unattainability and the distance from ordinary men and women is part of the logic of heroism."

Christian heroes, on the other hand, are characterized by

*"Unattainability and the distance from ordinary men and women is part of the logic of heroism."*

the heroism of self-renunciation, said Reno. Where secular heroism is a purification of the natural desire for power, Christian heroism is based on desire for faith, hope and love. Christian heroism is the renunciation of power.

An artist who serves beauty can be a genuine secular hero, said Reno. But the artist who surrounds himself with beautiful things is very different from St. Francis, a Christian hero who was willing to embrace a kind of ugliness for the sake of poverty.

Bouchard, the Virginia theologian, sees the defining characteristics of Christian heroism as self-emptying and a self-receiving love that results in tasks, vocations and relationships.

"The Christian hero would, in particular, be a sinner who would nonetheless be trying to respond to others' suffering or enjoying the presence of those searching for the ultimate ends of their lives," said Bouchard. Such a person might never be recognized as heroic but would at last be "known only to God."

Sometimes, said Bouchard, a Christian hero may just stand and wait or stand and be present, as in T.S. Eliot's play *Murder in the Cathedral*. In *Paradise Regained*, when the Son of God is faced with the last temptation, Milton writes that he stood, he just stood.

Bouchard said a Christian theological view of Tillman might be one of compassion and of compassionate criticism for how he has suffered under society's distorted attempts to produce classical or celebrity heroes.

"I would, for one, not worry much about (Tillman's) intrinsic heroism or lack thereof, which only God would be likely to 'see,'" he said. ◀

R. R. Reno is co-author with Brian S. Hook of *Heroism and the Christian Life: Reclaiming Excellence*. He is the author of *In the Ruins of the Church: Sustaining Faith in an Age of Diminished Christianity*.

Larry D. Bouchard is author of *Tragic Method and Tragic Theology: Evil in Contemporary Drama and Religious Thought*. He is working on a book that reconceptualizes "kenotic integrity."