

ON THE NATURE OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF

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ABSTRACT

The prevalence of religion and its immemorial practice notwithstanding, definitions of what constitutes religious belief remain hotly contested. This essay, using the work of philosopher Roy Clouser, critiques the definition of religious belief found in the later writing of philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich. Clouser and I contend that Tillich's definition excludes many beliefs of the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faiths. Moreover, I show how Tillich's definition is inconsistent with the beliefs of the Buddhist and Jainist faiths.

Paul Tillich (1886-1965), the eminent German theologian, began his theological studies at the age of 18 and was ordained at the age of 26 in the Evangelical Church of the Prussian Union in Berlin (Taylor 14). Over those eight years, he wrote extensively on philosopher F. W. J. von Schelling, from whom Tillich "developed his own vision of a 'Christian philosophy of existence'" (Taylor 14). This marked the starting point for the development of Tillich's philosophical views. Later in life, after Hitler and the Nazis came to power, Tillich immigrated to the United States, where his "writing was formed and nurtured by tensions arising from" this new social context (Taylor 14). In particular, he shifted from "analysis of a general cultural community" — "what several writers have called . . . Religious Socialist analyses" — to "general existentialist theology" (Taylor 16, 22). Consequently, the older Tillich stressed that "God was not *a* being, but 'Being-Itself' or 'the power of being'" (Taylor 22). This belief led to a "distinctive tension, between the immanence and transcendence of God" (Taylor 22), a point that Clouser addresses in his definition of religious belief and in his criticism of Tillich.

Tillich's concept of a God who is both immanent and transcendent has led to significant modern cultural changes, such as a "renewed and radical sense of divine immanence . . . in the feminist movements and theologies of our day" (Taylor 23). Feminist spiritualities "rarely turn to a higher deity to find a 'transcendence' of the brokenness forced upon women" (Taylor 24). Rather, "in a radically immanent way, they affirm the sacred *in* the created and very human realm: in the many dimensions of their bodiliness, in their coming together as women, in their coming to speech" (Taylor 24). Indeed, Tillich's views have proven important not only in philosophical and theological circles, but in everyday life. Whatever the criticism, then, whatever the tension in Tillich's immanent transcendence, it remains salient for many in our time (Taylor 24). This is true for philosopher Roy Clouser, who studied with Paul Tillich at Harvard University.

In *The Myth of Religious Neutrality*, Clouser addresses Tillich's definition of religious belief as he constructs his own alternative. Clouser argues that a "primary" religious belief, at its core, entails "a belief in something as divine per se no matter how that is further described, where 'divine per se' means having unconditionally non-dependent reality" (Clouser 12). Thus, this "unconditionally non-dependent reality" is the most significant, basic aspect of religious belief, for, according to Clouser, a religious belief cannot be so unless it involves belief in the divine per se; and the divine per se cannot truly be "divine per se" unless it is unconditionally non-dependent. In addition, Clouser asserts that a religious belief "is a belief about how the non-divine depends upon the divine per se" or "about how human [being]s come to stand in proper relation to the divine per se," both of which he calls "secondary beliefs" (24). Clouser's definitions of "primary beliefs" and "secondary beliefs" — in fact, his entire definition of religious belief — are at odds with Paul Tillich's.

Tillich declares “religious belief or faith to be identical with ‘ultimate concern’” (Clouser 12) and that “the dynamics of faith are the dynamics of man’s ultimate concern” (Tillich 1). “All people,” he claims, “are ultimately concerned about something, and the state of being ultimately concerned is a person’s religion” (Clouser 12). Essentially, according to Tillich, “ultimate concern” and “faith and religion” are equivalent. Additionally, Tillich states that “the ultimate concern is concern about what is experienced as ultimate” (Tillich 9). Thus, if “ultimate concern” is to be identical to “faith and religion,” then “faith and religion” must be experienced as ultimate. This definition, however, still leaves ambiguous what is “ultimate” and the meaning of “concerned,” so Tillich adds “that what is truly ultimate . . . is ‘being-itself’ or ‘the infinite’” (Clouser 13).

Using his definitions of “ultimate concern” and of the relation between ultimate concern and “faith and religion,” Tillich posits that “every faith has a concrete element in itself” and that “[faith] is concerned about something or somebody” (Clouser 18). “This something or somebody,” however, “may prove to be not ultimate at all,” in which case, “faith is a failure in its concrete expression” (Clouser 18). Faith must concern something or somebody – a god – that is ultimate; otherwise, for Tillich, it is not a true faith. Indeed, based on Tillich’s definition, many beliefs that are considered religious by large numbers of persons – including many Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and Jainists – are not religious. For this reason, Clouser finds Tillich’s concept of religious belief (along with Tillich’s aversion to the aforementioned popularly held religious beliefs) too narrow and flawed.

In order for a belief to be religious, according to Tillich, it must not be concerned with a god that is a being separate from the universe, humanity, etc., but rather one that constitutes the entire universe and everything that comes with it. “In true faith the ultimate concern is a concern about the truly ultimate” – and the truly infinite – “while in idolatrous faith preliminary, finite realities are elevated to the rank of ultimacy” (Tillich 12). Thus, religions that embrace a god that does *not* constitute the entire universe and everything that comes with it are “idolatrous.” Moreover, regarding “being-itself” in religions that do not maintain that there is a god – at the most basic level, a divine figure upon which the non-divine depends – the followers of those religions should believe that existence, or “being-itself,” is more important than non-existence, as these followers embody that value rather than a god. Thus, only when existence takes precedence over non-existence – either by way of a god or the beliefs of the followers of a religion – could Tillich’s requirements for religious belief be fulfilled.

About Tillich’s beliefs in “the infinite,” Clouser notes, “whatever is infinite in [Tillich’s] sense must be unlimited in such a way that there could be nothing distinct from it” (13). This unlimited reality in which nothing is distinct from anything else is very similar to what Clouser calls “Pantheism.” According to Clouser, pantheism is one continuous reality in which the non-divine is a(n illusory) part of the divine (Clouser 48). The reality of this type of religion is continuous and, therefore, infinite. In pantheistic religions, in fact, there is often nothing distinct from anything else, as these religions assume that everything is the same, regardless of what that state of sameness entails (e.g. *all* is nothing in Buddhism).

By believing that whatever is ultimate must also be infinite, Tillich’s “definition of faith,” in Clouser’s estimation, “turns out to be too narrow” (13). Numerous religions, Clouser maintains, violate Tillich’s definition. Given my belief that religion entails, at its core, a belief in the metaphysical – which includes the divine, as defined by Clouser – I largely agree with Clouser’s definition and concur with Clouser that Tillich’s definition is too narrow. Because whatever is ultimate must also be infinite according to Tillich, his definition of religious belief is at variance with all three “Biblical” (as termed by Clouser) religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. As Clouser explains, the most basic belief of these religions is that there is *not* one continuous reality, as opposed to pantheism, in which there *is* one continuous reality. Instead, the “Biblical” idea of creation posits that “God the Creator is distinct from the universe which he brought into existence out of nothing” and that “according to this teaching, the divine per se is not part of the universe nor is the universe part of the divine; there is a fundamental discontinuity between the creator and all else which is his creation” (Clouser 50). Because this ultimate being is not infinite, however, Tillich believes that “if someone were to say that God is ultimate but also believe that the universe is a reality other than God, that person would be inconsistent” because if there were “anything other than God, God would then be limited by what he is not and thus would not be

infinite and so not really ultimate" (Clouser 50). The result of this would be, according to Tillich, false or "idolatrous faith" (Tillich 12). Given what Clouser argues is essential to religion, however – unconditional non-dependence – and that this "Biblical" belief is unconditionally non-dependent, it can be considered religious; and because this "Biblical" belief is clearly based on metaphysical principles, I, too, classify it as religious. Thus, in the case of "Biblical" religions, Clouser and I both disagree with Tillich that "religious belief or faith" is that which is of "ultimate concern" because Tillich's definition is far too narrow (Clouser 12).

Besides "Biblical" religions, Tillich's definition excludes the beliefs of some pantheistic religions, such as Buddhism. While Buddhists profess that the universe is "infinite" since there is one continuous reality, they seek non-existence rather than existence (Conze 93). That is, they desire to escape the cycle of birth and rebirth. By so doing, they would no longer exist as human beings per se, thus making life in the human sense finite, which violates both Tillich's "being-itself" and "the infinite." Thus, "if [Tillich's] religious faith is . . . concerned about the ultimate only in his sense" – which includes "being-itself" or "the infinite" – "then anyone whose concern is with something taken to be ultimate but not infinite as he understands 'infinite' would simply have no religious belief whatever" (Clouser 13). Hence, according to Tillich, followers of Buddhism really have no religious belief at all, an assertion that I think dubious.

Buddhism violates Tillich's religious requirement of "the infinite." Buddhists strive to overcome an endless cycle of birth and rebirth, called "Samsara," in order to achieve "Nirvana," release from the cycle. This ideal contradicts Tillich's definition because Buddhists aim at *defying* longevity, *not* being incarnated and reincarnated infinitely, and achieving permanent *release from being*. Although one could argue that achieving Nirvana brings one in touch with *permanent* nothingness, the idea of the infinite in Buddhism is contradictory. One is either trapped as a human being in "Samsara," or one achieves the divine permanence of "Nirvana," but never both simultaneously, which demonstrates the finite nature of Buddhism. In addition, this last point also violates Tillich's concept of "being-itself" since Buddhists seek to avoid being.

The practice of religious asceticism also contradicts Tillich's views. In many religions, monks deny themselves the basic necessities of life so as to become more in touch with the divine. In the pantheistic religion of Jainism, monks burn their skin, starve themselves, and otherwise mortify their bodies in myriad ways (Zaehner 259). From Tillich's standpoint, however, a religion that espouses such ideals would likely not be classified as such because its loyal followers violate one of the basic premises of his idea of what is religious, i.e. "being-itself," because they value non-existence over existence. Clouser, however, argues that Jainism – and other pantheistic religions with similar practices – is a religion because it professes an unconditional, non-dependent (divine, in this case) reality. In addition, pantheistic religions are based largely on metaphysical beliefs, for they are concerned with happenings outside of the physical world, so I, too, believe that Jainism is a religion. Thus, both Clouser and I disagree with Tillich's conception of religious beliefs.

Tillich, according to Clouser, tries to distinguish true from false religions. False religions are "concerned with something that is not infinite in [Tillich's] sense. . . . [They] intend their concern to be for that which is infinite but fall short" (Clouser 13). This amounts to saying, however, according to Clouser, that "true religion is concern or belief which *succeeds* in being directed to the infinite, while false religion is concern which *intends* to be directed to the infinite but misses" (Clouser 13). The religions discussed in this essay neither succeed nor intend to be infinite in Tillich's sense and so "'ultimate concern,' as Tillich defines it, is not a characteristic of these religions and is too narrow to be the essential definition of all religious belief" (Clouser 13).

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