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# **Paul Tillich and the Knights of the Round Table**

*Dan Litster*

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Ye take away my gods which I made, and the  
priest, and go away, and what have I left?

Judges 18:24

Since the advent of empirical inquiry and the scientific method in the seventeenth century, science has presented a problem for traditional Christianity. Today our scientifically-minded society tends to explain everyday experience through empirical observables, leaving very little room for God in our lives. William L. Rowe of Purdue University states in his textbook *Philosophy of Religion* that “the idea of God is becoming more and more irrelevant to human life in the modern world” (p. 185), and because of this, the question whether traditional forms of religion will survive in modern times is often discussed. I believe twentieth-century theologians, like Paul Tillich, are on the right path towards making religions more relevant to modern-day life. These men have introduced alternatives to the traditional theistic conception of God in order to make God an idea modern people can relate to. Whether or not these attempts are successful (I will discuss later that Tillich’s is not), their merit lies in their fulfillment of the modern need for a practical alternative to traditional theism.

The application of science and the evolution of technology have reduced man’s sense of dependency on God. The possible intervention of the divine into our everyday lives seems much less plausible than in previous eras, and man’s increasing ability to take care of his own needs has led to the assumption that social and individual well-being depend much less, if at all, on God’s providence, and more on technological achievement and social planning. If religious action is regarded as less and less effective in relation to worldly experience, traditional forms of religion will diminish in both scope and scale. This is why I believe that men like Paul Tillich are correct in their search for alternatives to traditional theism. For religious belief to survive cultural change in the modern world it must be independent of scientific inquiry, as well as become practical, in order to relate to a culture of material wants, needs, and expectations.

Tillich’s solution is to actually transform religious belief into the expression “ultimate concern.” “To be ultimately concerned about something,” Tillich explains, “is to be completely committed and devoted to that thing, to view it as the center of your life, that which gives meaning and significance to everything else” (p. 186). Therefore, being religious does not depend on accepting the existence of a supreme being. Instead, it is complete commitment and utter devotion to some ultimate concern. For some people, an ultimate concern may be God, Christ or Buddha, while still others might have money, power, or success as their focus. Tillich uses this notion of an ultimate concern because he believes that it is the common demonination among all of the great religions.

Tillich’s attempt to provide an alternative to traditional theism

unfortunately encounters problems. Rowe presents three concise reasons which explain why Tillich's philosophy might seem attractive. The second reason he gives is that

Tillich's account is comprehensive in that it seeks to illuminate not only the major religions by which human beings have lived, but also the quasi-religions where ultimate concern is focused on objects or goals normally not thought of as religious, such as success or the nation (p. 192).

Of the three reasons, this is the most important one to consider, for it deals with the part of Tillich's philosophy that fails. As I mentioned earlier, the merit of alternatives to traditional theism lies in their ability to be independent of scientific inquiry and practical for modern society. Whether or not Tillich has successfully avoided scientific inquiry and justification for belief in God is one matter; the more important point is whether or not he is able to provide a practical theistic alternative. According to Tillich, the object of an ultimate concern is usually something concrete, such as a person or a social group, and not a metaphysical ultimate. The person who holds this ultimate concern identifies these concrete objects as symbols of his ultimate concern, through which the person may point to, and thereby participate in the ultimate. For example, a person may hold as his ultimate concern success. He may then point to objects such as his Porsche 944 or American Express Gold Card as symbols of his ultimate concern. He therefore participates in his ultimate concern of success through these objects. There are problems, however, if we accept Tillich's quasi-religions where ultimate concerns may be focused on goals such as success, for it becomes apparent that almost anything which is an ultimate concern may be considered a religion. In creating the potential for an infinite number of religions, Tillich only succeeds in creating chaos.

Tillich's philosophy is also impractical in everyday life. For example, it would be very impractical for modern society to hold true the Constitution and at the same time accept Tillich's theological philosophy. According to the first amendment of the Constitution, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Imagine General Motors claiming that its ultimate concern is success, therefore making it a religious entity instead of a corporation. Therefore, an entire restructuring of the United States financial system would be required in order to allow for Tillich's philosophy.

Another problem with Tillich's philosophy is that he believes that

the highest ultimate concern for much of western civilization is God. Besides his inability to satisfactorily justify this belief, I do not see this concern reflected in society. If anything, society is progressively becoming more and more secularized. This can be seen in the decreasing importance in the religious aspect of weddings. More and more frequently marriage ceremonies are held outside of a church, either in a park, a backyard, or at the office of the Justice of the Peace. Even those ceremonies that do take place in a church are often overshadowed by the anticipation of a reception. The idea of God as the uniting force behind the couple does not seem to be as important as it once was, either. There is also less allusion in modern society to God's will as the guide for attitudes, comportment, and action, and resort to prayers or curses is less frequent. Religious symbols have lost their vibrancy and meaning, and charms, rosaries, and crosses have become largely decorative items. Everyday life is negotiated by pragmatic attitudes, and cause-and-effect thinking. If the ultimate concern of western civilization really is God, then I would expect to see more religious influence in society.

The question of whether or not traditional forms of religion will survive the continual cultural changes of modern times is interesting. Tillich's attempts at so doing, despite his faults, are a definite step in the right direction. Many traditional forms of religion may radically change or even disappear in the years to come. But historically it also seems that as soon as one form of religion loses favor, another rises in competition, or takes its place. Man's finite existence and desire to understand the uncertainties of the world around him make his search for some ultimate values and realities inevitable. The existentialist theologians of the twentieth century will need to put on their plate armour and gather together at the round table if they wish to fulfill this twentieth-century religious quest.