

Paul tillich: dynamics of faith | summary and analysis



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Paul Tillich

In this essay I will be discussing my view of Paul Tillich's theory of religion based upon his book "Dynamics of Faith." I will give examples from his text that support my view. The very title "Dynamics of Faith" leads to the question, what is faith? Faith can hold many meanings, especially when used in the context of religion. Tillich explains faith in the first chapter of the book. "Faith is the state of being ultimately concerned: the dynamics of faith are the dynamics of man's ultimate concern." (pg. 1) He also states that the concern must be unconditional. Faith doesn't have to necessarily be religious. It can be non-religious. For instance ultimate concern with a person's career, raising their children or even concern that a farmer's crops will grow can all be considered non-religious. The Jewish and Christian faith in God and the Muslim faith in Allah are good examples of "ultimate concern" in a religious context.

Tillich states that faith is a centered act. "Faith as ultimate concern is an act of the total personality. It happens in the center of the personal life and includes all its elements." (pg. 4) The human mind's most centered act is faith. Everything revolves around faith. It is not simply a function or section of a man but his total being. Tillich states however that faith is more than the sum of all man's parts or impacts. It can involve rationality and it can involve emotion, but it transcends them both. Faith can have an impact on both rationality and emotion without destroying both in the process. It is what Tillich calls "ecstatic." This means one can stand outside themselves without ceasing to be themselves.

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Tillich states that faith is both conscious and unconscious. Since faith is the total act of personality, it is impossible to imagine faith without the unconscious elements of one's personality. Faith as a conscious act relies on the unconscious elements to create faith. If simply unconscious forces determine a mental status, Tillich states, it is not faith but rather compulsion. He also states that faith is freedom. "Freedom is nothing more than the possibility of centered personal acts." (pg. 6) Since faith is a free and centered act of personality, freedom and faith are equal.

For faith to exist in something there must be two sides, the subjective side of faith and the objective side of faith. Tillich illustrates this by using the terms "fides qua creditor (the faith through which one believes) and the fides quae creditor (the faith which is believed)." (pg. 11) Simply there is no faith without something to have faith in. When using terms such as "absolute" and "ultimate" subjectivity and objectivity are the same. If God is the "ultimate concern: then he is both the subject and the object. This is considered true ultimacy. When faith cannot be both object and subject it is simply false ultimacy. Tillich gives the examples of a nation or success as false ultimacy. This is because it is in the believer's eyes just an object it is subject to ordinary knowledge and handling.

This leads to the subject of true faith and idolatrous faith. In true faith the "ultimate concern" is simply a faith in the truly ultimate, God, for example. The truly ultimate is infinite, the subject is the object. In idolatrous faith, "finite realities are elevated to the rank of ultimacy." (pg. 13) The subject is almost overtaken by the object but this is temporary and the subject returns again leading to "existential disappointment." This is because it leads to a <https://assignbuster.com/paul-tillich-dynamics-of-faith-summary-and-analysis/>

loss of center and disrupts the personality, which according to Tillich can be hidden for a length of time but always exposes itself eventually. Idolatrous faith is still considered faith. "The holy which is demonic is still holy." (pg. 18) This shows how faith can be ambiguous and dangerous. Idolatry is a danger of faith and the fact that there is a "demonic possibility" of the holy is the ambiguity. Faith can destroy us or heal us, but according to Tillich we can never be without it.

It is often thought that the word doubt means the lack of faith. Doubt is merely the lack of conviction. It is also an important aspect of faith. "An act of faith is an act of a infinite being who is grasped by and turned to the infinite." (pg. 18) Doubt is the opposite of our "ultimate concern." Humans are finite beings and have to accept uncertainty in faith. This is where courage plays a role. Tillich uses a larger concept of the word courage rather than the dictionary definition. "Courage as an element of faith is the daring self-affirmation of one's own being in spite of the powers of "non-believing" which are the heritage of everything finite." (pg. 19) We must accept the possibility of failure. This possibility is present in every act of faith. This is a risk and it must be taken in order to maintain the "ultimate concern."

Now that we have established what faith is I will look at what faith is not. According to Tillich, there is an intellectualistic distortion of the meaning of faith. This is done not only by the popular mind but also philosophical and theological thought. Since faith is a centered act of the whole personality one function of thought cannot completely identify with faith without distorting what faith is. Faith is not simply an "act of knowledge that has a low degree of evidence" (pg. 36) This describes a belief, not faith. A belief is <https://assignbuster.com/paul-tillich-dynamics-of-faith-summary-and-analysis/>

based upon evidence that is sufficient enough to add a high degree of probability.

A belief can be varied. We believe things when we have good evidence about them or when they are stated by good authorities. When we accept the authority's evidence as true it is often because we are unable to approach the evidence directly. History books are a good example of this. We are unable to prove that it happened because we weren't witness to it but believe it because we believe the author. This cannot be considered faith though simply because although we trust the authorities, it is never unconditional. We don't have faith in them. Tillich states " Faith is more than trust in authorities, although trust is an important element of faith." (pg. 37) Tillich uses this thought when he describes early Biblical writers. Christians believe the writings but never unconditionally, they don't have faith in them and therefore " should not even have faith in the Bible." (pg. 37)

There is also a voluntaristic distortion of the meaning of faith. This is true mainly for Catholics and Protestants.

According to Tillich, Catholics believe that the lack of evidence that faith provides must be complemented with an act of will. This states that faith is understood as knowledge with limited evidence that is made up by the willful act. Tillich refers to this as the " will to believe." The Protestant version of the " will to believe" is connected with the morality of the believer. These beliefs state that faith is dependent upon the teachings of the church which is not the case.

The third and final distortion of the meaning of faith is the emotionalistic distortion. This interprets faith as a matter of emotion. Tillich states that this distortion is partly supported by both the religious and the secular. “ For the defenders of religion it was a retreat to a seemingly safe position after the battle about faith as a matter of knowledge or will had been lost.” (pg. 44) It was also readily accepted by scientists and representatives of ethics simply because it took away any interference from the religious in matters of scientific research. Tillich responds to this by stating that faith is not “ a matter of merely subjective emotions, without a content to be known and a demand to be obeyed” (pg. 45) Faith has strong emotional elements tied to it but emotion isn't the source of faith.

Tillich believes that man's “ ultimate concern” has to be expressed through the use of symbolic language. Symbolic language is the only language able to express the ultimate. He states that symbols have many characteristics. One characteristic in which they have in common with signs is the fact that “ they point beyond themselves to something else.” (pg. 47) He uses the example of a stop sign. The sign points to the order to stop movement of a vehicle for a specific amount of time. The color red has absolutely nothing to do with the stopping of a vehicle. When combined with a sign it simply points to the idea that one should stop their vehicle.

The second characteristic of a symbol is that “ It participates in that to which it points.” (pg. 48) Here he uses the example of a flag. The flag stands for the power and dignity of the nation that it belongs to. An attack on a nation's flag is considered an attack on the dignity of that nation and is considered to

be blasphemy. The flag isn't responsible for the power or dignity but simply symbolizes it.

The third characteristic of a symbol is " that it opens up levels of reality which otherwise are closed to us." (pg. 48) The example used here is that a picture or a poem or even a story show us elements of reality that cannot be studied scientifically. Creativity opens up a reality in a dimension that cannot be accessed otherwise. This ties in with the fourth characteristic. This is characteristic opens up dimensions and elements of reality that are otherwise unapproachable AND elements of our souls that correspond to the elements of reality. He uses the example of a play in this scenario. The play gives us a vision of what is going on but also opens a dimension in our own being. We can comprehend what is happening in reality but there are also dimensions that we cannot access without the use of symbols. " Melodies and rhythms in music." (pg. 49)

Symbols are not to be produced intentionally, but grow out of our individual or collective unconscious. These symbols must be accepted by our unconscious or else they have no function. Tillich states that any symbol with an especially social function is created by the group's collective unconscious in which they appear. Political and religious symbols are examples of this. The final characteristic of a symbol is the fact that the symbols cannot be invented. They grow and also die. When the situation calls for them, they grow. When that situation changes, they die. An example of this is a King. The symbol of a king used to mean something and produce a response of servitude and loyalty. This is no longer the case because for the most parts kings have been replaced by political leaders.

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Tillich explains that God is the fundamental symbol of our “ultimate concern.” It is always present when considering acts of faith. He states that God can only be denied in the name of God. Since an “ultimate concern” cannot deny itself it affirms itself. Atheism is simply the attempt to remove any “ultimate concern” from our lives. Tillich states that the only true form of Atheism is in difference toward the ultimate question. One cannot deny God because by doing so he confirms the existence of God. One can argue that in this case God is simply just a symbol, to which Tillich replies “God is a symbol for God.” (pg. 53) Tillich believes that God is the basic symbol of faith, but states that there are many other symbols as well. Manifestations of the divine in such things as documents and in words, in people and communities, even events are all symbols of faith. Tillich believes that holy things are not themselves holy, they are merely objects that point toward the source of holiness, which is the “ultimate concern.”

Symbols of faith aren't isolated. Tillich believes that the symbols are united in myths. He states that mythic gods are based upon human characteristics, they have personalities, are of both sexes, are related, and even participate in human struggles. Often the gods are not equal and live in hierarchies. There is usually one god or a small group of gods that rule over the other gods. Tillich states that all myths are fundamentally the same, “man's ultimate concern symbolized in divine figures and actions.” (pg. 56) Myths are simply symbols of faith that are combined in stories of what Tillich calls “divine-human encounters.”

Myths appear in every act of faith. They are often attacked and criticized because they use material from ordinary experiences. It adds a human

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experience of time and space when the “ultimate” is beyond time and space. A myth often divides what is considered divine into many figures. Doing this removes ultimacy without removing the claim to ultimacy. This causes criticism because it rejects the division of the divine claiming there is only one God. Tillich states that God is an object of mythological language and is often drawn into the human experience of time and space. This makes God a “concrete concern” and removes his ultimacy. Polytheistic mythology isn’t all that is rejected. Even monotheism falls under criticism. Tillich states that it needs “demythologization.” The word is used in connection with many of the mythical elements used in the Bible. Stories where “divine-human interactions” occur are in character considered mythological. However, they are also objects of demythologization.

Any myth that has been proven to be a myth but is not replaced is called a “broken myth.” There is a tremendous backlash when considering “broken myths” as no culture wants any of their myths to be proven false and lose its power. People who live in an unbroken mythological world feel protected and safe. Tillich states this type of thinking is supported by authoritarian systems because it gives false security to the people whom they control and also unchallenged power over them. He calls this “literalism.”

Literalism allows myths to be understood by their immediate meaning. They are placed in a human context, events are attributed to ideas that humans understand. For example, the virgin birth is understood in a biological sense.

“Literalism deprives God of his ultimacy and, religiously speaking, of his majesty.” (pg. 60) It basically draws God down to the human level of the finite and conditional, which he cannot be since he is ultimate. “Faith, if it <https://assignbuster.com/paul-tillich-dynamics-of-faith-summary-and-analysis/>

takes its symbols literally, becomes idolatrous! It calls something ultimate which is less than ultimate.” (pg. 60)

Tillich speaks of many types of faith. These types vary from religion to religion, culture to culture, and even from individual to individual. The variance in these faiths has to do with the variation of symbols of the faith. These types all have one thing in common. They all are united because of their focus on “ ultimate concern.”

There is a relationship between faith and history, science, and philosophy. Tillich believes that if our “ ultimate concern” is really ultimate then it is not affected by any of the conclusions provided by history, science, or philosophy. He explains this by stating that a symbol of the ultimate is not ultimate in itself but merely a way of representing that which is ultimate. Therefore a faith is true if it represents the ultimate.

Tillich believes that “ the experience of actual faith, of faith as a living reality...” (pg. 115) is considered the life of faith. He once again states that having faith is having courage. Faith is integrated in to our everyday personalities and plays some role in shaping them. Faith is ingrained with various tensions. Tensions between doubt and courage, being estranged or being whole, between ourselves and our communities. He states we must maintain balance between faith, hope, and love so that they play a role in the totality of our personalities. Faith is present in our communities and is important. We use the faith and symbols of our communities and express them through ourselves, the individual.

Faith is the central phenomenon in the personal life of mankind. It is visible and invisible at the same time. It is both religious and non-religious. It is universal and set in stone. It can be changing but is always the same. Tillich states that it is “ an essential possibility of man, and therefore its existence is necessary and universal.” (pg. 146) If faith is our “ ultimate concern” than it cannot be undercut by science, superstition, and distortion of church and state. Faith alone stands upon itself and justifies itself.

I feel that Tillich’s theories follow and partially agree with the theories of Freud and Durkheim. He explores with detail the human mind and our psyche. This determines our personality and as Tillich states many times faith is deeply ingrained in our personalities. Faith is an act of total personality. Faith is both an act of rational and unconscious elements. Tillich even applies faith to Freud’s naturalistic negation of norms and principles stating that “ Faith and culture can be affirmed only if the superego represents the norms and principles of reality.” (pg. 6) Freud states that if the superego is not established through valid ideas it becomes suppressive. With real faith, even if it uses Freud’s father image, creates true ideas or principles and therefore it rings true.

Durkheim states that religion is community, Tillich agrees with this. A community provides the symbols of faith in which people believe. The individual expresses their faith through the community. Therefore without the community there are no symbols of faith in which to represent that which is ultimate.

When considering Marx in this equation, the two cannot be further apart. For Marx, religion or faith were nonexistent and something that was just invented to quell our meager existence in this world. Tillich states that faith is us and has always been ingrained in us. He states that to deny the existence of God only strengthens the case that God exists. Therefore Marx's theory holds no water in Tillich's eyes. He states that " the rejection of faith is rooted in a complete misunderstanding of the nature of faith." (pg. 146) The denial of faith is an " ultimate concern" so therefore is faith in itself.

Citation

Tillich, Paul. Dynamics of Faith. New York: Harper, 1958. Print.