

Editorial Foreword

The Origin and Extension of Concerns on the “Ultimate”

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“Ultimate Concern” as a modern concept came from theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965), who used it as “a definition of the meaning of the ‘idea’ of God as he understands it and as he also finds it exemplified in a phenomenological survey of humankind’s religions.”^① Why would a “survey of humankind’s religions” lead to a definition of the meaning of “God”? The implied meaning is obvious: human experience and understandings of God are interconnected and mutually formed.

In Tillich’s view, the finite nature of humankind means that some fundamental questions can never be answered. These unanswerable questions have often been ascribed to God, who does not need to answer the questions, and who has been called “the name for that which concerns man ultimately.”^② Such human concerns are frequently thought to be “unconscious and hidden,” and in regard to Tillich’s discussion, it can either be said that “there is no cultural creation without an ultimate concern expressed in it [language]”^③ or that “the theological ‘answers’ that such theologies offer are substantively shaped by the ‘questions’ posed by the secular culture itself.”^④

^① Bernard Martin, *The Existentialist Theology of Paul Tillich* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1963), 145.

^② Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 211.

^③ Paul Tillich, “Aspects of a Religion Analysis Culture,” in *The Essential Tillich: An Anthology of the Writings of Paul Tillich*, ed. F. Forrester Church (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 103.

^④ James C. Livingston, et al., *Modern Christian Thought*, Vol. 2, trans. HE Guanghu, et al. (Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2014), 303.

For these reasons, Tillich set up two formal criteria of theology. The first is that “The object of theology is what concerns us ultimately,” and the second, “Our ultimate concern is that which determines our being or not being.”^① For theologians, this naturally “points to the existential character of religious experience.”^② However, if we allow for the link between “questions” and “answers” discussed above, the “no-need-to-answer” does not mean that human beings entrust only the “unanswered questions” to faith or belief. Faith has to be something more; rather, it is in the mutual completion of questions and answers that “humankind’s religions” find their *raison d’être*. In Tillich’s own words, “Only that which is holy can give man ultimate concern, and only that which gives man ultimate concern has the quality of holiness.”^③

In other words, only when people sense their limits and finite nature will they address the issue of ultimate concern. Ultimate concern is a response to the human search for values and also leads to an explanation of why and how the Sacred is sacred. As such, “the Sacred” and “ultimate concern” are not only mutually predicative, but also should only be mutually predicative; there is no necessity to move from the transcendent to the “sacred” or any other sanctifiable alternative. This is the limit that must be maintained, without which there can be nothing called “ultimate”. Perhaps it is only on this basis that we may understand Northrop Frye’s “primary concern,” “secondary concern,” and his extension of Tillich.

In several places Frye mentions “what I call concern, a term that I hope is self-explanatory.”^④ Frye’s “primary” connotes “primitive”, but also the “first” and even the “most important”. Frye is speaking to Tillich here because he thinks that “Paul Tillich distinguishes the religious concern as ‘ultimate’: it may be that, but it can hardly be primary,”^⑤ while Frye himself repeatedly emphasizes that “primary concerns must become

^① Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, 12, 14.

^② James C. Livingston, Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, et al., *Modern Christian Thought: The Twentieth Century*, Vol. 2, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 142.

^③ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, 215.

^④ Northrop Frye, *Myth and Metaphor: Selected Essays, 1974-1988*, ed. Robert D. Denham (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 21, 120, 267.

^⑤ *Ibid.*, 88.

primary.”^①

Frye’s reason for this seems to be very physical: he writes “One cannot live a day without being concerned about food, but one may live all one’s life without being concerned about God.”^② He also explicitly describes “primary concern” as something unrefined or rustic: “Primary concern is based on the most primitive of platitudes: the conviction that life is better than death, happiness better than misery, freedom better than bondage.”^③ Later he adds other “betters”: “it is better to be fed than starving, ... better to be healthy than sick.”^④ How can such mundane “basic concerns” be the “most important concerns”? This leads to Frye’s argument on “secondary concern,” and why in “secondary concerns” the “ideals” above the “primary” are bound to fall apart.

According to Frye, “Secondary concern includes loyalty to one’s own society, to one’s religious or political beliefs, to one’s place in the class structure.”^⑤ Elsewhere he writes, “It is our concern for living in social units that builds up societies into nations to be defended in war, into religious *Confessions* to be maintained by enforced agreement and the persecution of dissidents, into class structures where the different strata of society have different rights and privileges.”^⑥

Frye’s mordant criticism of “secondary concern” is scathingly accurate when he says: “We prefer to live, but we go to war; we prefer to be free, but we keep a large number of people in a second-class status, and so on. In the twentieth century the dangers of persisting in the bad habits of ... exploitation both of human beings and of nature, have brought humanity to a choice between survival and extinction.”^⑦ If this is what “secondary concern” is all about, “the present age ... is an age in which secondary concerns are rapidly dissolving.”^⑧

^① Northrop Frye, *Myth and Metaphor: Selected Essays, 1974-1988*, 91, 120, 267.

^② *Ibid.*, 88.

^③ *Ibid.*, 21.

^④ *Ibid.*, 267.

^⑤ *Ibid.*, 21.

^⑥ *Ibid.*, 88.

^⑦ *Ibid.*, 120.

^⑧ *Ibid.*, 58.

Tillich's starting point was the finite nature of human beings: "The holy" and "ultimate concern" are mutually constituted, but this certainly does not automatically validate values presented in the name of "the holy." According to Frye, once concern for "higher (secondary) concerns" becomes dominant, this can only highlight our own embarrassment. It can neither comfort human souls, nor help solve the absurdities of the world. In saying this, Frye is not advocating a return to "primary concern" but asking how we may rediscover "the ultimate".

Frye's concerns highlight the primary purpose of Tillich: the origin of concerns about the "ultimate" is related to a faith-based understanding of religious experience, while the meaning of "ultimate" addresses not only secular values but also religions or faith expressions that can be secularized. Therefore, only that which is "ultimate" can be "holy", and that which is "holy" must also have the quality of the "ultimate." Tillich's "cultural theology" precisely embraces this dual emphasis. While it seems that Frye's theory is critical of Tillich's view, it may be that Frye is addressing the same issue from the perspective of "theological culture." In brief, Tillich takes "the quality of holiness" as the sole definition of "ultimate concern," while Frye is using "loyalty to one's own beliefs" to reveal everyone's pseudo ultimate. This is the key point to understanding the "ultimate," and one which may be set to be expanded in literary and philosophical explorations.

For instance, Frye trusts that literary works differ from "normal language": "some literary works show the capacity to make contact with an audience far removed in space, time, and culture, ... In an age of ideological deadlock like ours, with so many foolish and irresponsible people saying 'Let's go to war to smash somebody else's ideology,' I feel that this critical task has taken on a renewed social importance."^① He also reminds us: "The cosmologies of Dante and Milton are full of what is now pseudoscience, but that does not affect their worth in the literary structures they inform, because, as Paul Valery remarks, cosmology is an aspect of literature."^② Although there may be no empirical support for a literary work, literature might be the only place where "ultimate" ideals can dwell, which is akin to

^① Northrop Frye, *Myth and Metaphor: Selected Essays, 1974-1988*, 268.

^② *Ibid.*, 119.

Tillich’s definition of the “holy”.

The pursuit of truth through poetic logic is found in Giambattista Vico’s famous maxim: “verum factum.” As explained by Frye, “reality is in the world we make and not in the world we stare at.”^① In this way, Tillich’s “ultimate concern” also finds expression through literary works. Whether their starting point is dialectical thinking or poetics, Tillich and Frye share the same interest in exposing the lies of “secondary concern.” This connection responds to questions of “finite” and the “infinite” that traverse eras and cultures.

In the Chinese classics, Confucius’ exclamation “All is transient, like this! Unceasing day and night!” (逝者如斯夫，不舍昼夜)^② might best represent humanity’s everlasting helplessness, or sighing at the transience of life. In commenting on this saying, the Song dynasty Neo-Confucian scholar Zhu Xi related this natural phenomenon to a philosophical discovery: “天地之化，往者过、来者续，无一息之停，乃道体之本然也，然其可指而易见者，莫如川流。”^③ In his translation and commentary on *The Analects*, Edward Williams Soothill quotes half of Zhu Xi’s commentary in Chinese (天地之化，往者过、来者续，无一息之停), but his translation contains the full meaning Zhu Xi intended to express: “The revolutions of Nature are unbroken and unceasing in their progressive changes,—they are the external phenomena of Tao, and their simplest illustration is that of a flowing stream.”^④ Soothill added as proof a translation of the saying of another Neo-Confucian scholar “Master Cheng”: “This is the nature of Tao, ... the days go and the months come, the cold goes and the heat comes, the water flows unceasing and things are brought into existence un exhaustedly.”^⑤ James Legge referred to Zhu Xi’s 天地之化 in his commentary on this phrase but explained it

^① Northrop Frye, *Myth and Metaphor: Selected Essays, 1974-1988*, 122.

^② Confucius, *The Analects*, Chapter 9 “Zi han,” Verse 17. Chinese text and James Legge’s English translation please see <https://ctext.org/Analects/zi-han> (Accessed on August 1, 2020).

^③ Zhu Xi, “Collected Commentaries on *Analects*,” in *Sishu zhangju jizhu* (Interlinear Analysis of and Collected Commentaries on the Four Books), Chinese texts please see Chapter 9 verse 16: <https://ctext.org/si-shu-zhang-ju-ji-zhu/zi-han-di-jiu/zh> (accessed on August 1, 2020).

^④ William Edward Soothill, trans., *The Analects of Confucius* (Yokohama: The Presbyterian Mission Press, 1910), 442.

^⑤ *Ibid.*

directly in western terms as “our ‘course of nature’.”^① Whether in inter-textual interpretations of the classics or in Chinese and Western interpretations of each others’ traditions, the connections in ancient wisdom are always faintly visible.

Another translator of the *Analects*, Pierre Ryckmans (pen name of Simon Leys), compares Confucius to Heraclitus in his commentary on this saying and exclaims: “Everything flows like this: exact equivalent of panta rhei. Confucius and Heraclitus were contemporaries!” Ryckmans further explains that “Flowing water is a fairly universal metaphor, used not only to suggest constant moral endeavor but also to provide psychological and emotional comfort.” To underscore his argument, he quotes Samuel Johnson: “Our minds, like our bodies, are in constant flux; something is hourly lost and something acquired...”^②

The discovery that “the passing of time is like the flowing of water” (逝者如斯) may thus be a most simple and most universal human experience. Just as Chinese sages glimpsed “the Nature of the Dao” (道体之本然) through this common, simple human experience, Western philosophers have experienced the eternal and the infinite through finite, daily life and morals. This hidden connection between “the Ultimate” and “the Primary” precisely responds to Frye’s quest to rediscover “the Ultimate”: the unexamined “ultimate concern” is very fragile when it serves as a means of overcoming the danger of “self-sanctification,” or of transgressing “the infinite” through “the finite.”

To grasp the “Ultimate” from the “the Primary” and to deal with the philosophical questions of the finite and the infinite tasks are embodied in the human experience of life and death. To remain with examples from the *Analects*. Human beings long for longevity, and most people’s greatest desire is to live as long as possible. Yet in the *Analects*, the word “shou 寿” (longevity) only appears in one place: “知者乐，仁者寿” (The wise are joyful; the virtuous are long-lived), while “sang 丧” (lost)

^① James Legge, trans., *The Analects of Confucius*, in *The Chinese Classics with a Translation, Critical and Exegetical Notes Prolegomena, and Copious Indexes*, Vol. 1 (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2010 [1893]), 222.

^② Simon Leys, trans., *The Analects of Confucius* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 162.

and “zhong 终” (end) are seen frequently in the text. Everyone likes to quote Confucius’ saying “While you do not know life, how can you know about death?” (未知生，焉知死), and yet all know that “life” has limits and “longevity” is bounded. Questions of the “Ultimate” are provoked by experiences of the “finite”. If we explore Tillich’s “cultural theology” and Frye’s “theological culture” from this, we might see why the meaning of the “Ultimate” must not only transcend the emblem of the “sacred” and the limits of “identity,” but also suggests that the secular anticipation in which we find ourselves may contain within itself an opposing logic.

Thus, it is imperative to include literary and philosophical perspectives on Ultimate Concerns in the quest for the meaning of the “Ultimate”. To this end, we have invited several European and American scholars from various specialties to address the topic in this issue. They deal with concerns of the “ultimate” in its varied expressions in Chinese and Western literature and philosophy, in order to evaluate its origins, trace its expansion, and clarify common concerns in our reading experience. These include life and death, happiness and misfortune, being-in-the-world and living-outside-the-world, wisdom and foolishness, grace and recompense, selfishness and altruism, duty and destiny.... This is one reason why we have many translated papers in this issue. In Mircea Eliade’s words: “Religion ... does not necessarily imply belief in God, gods, or spirits, but refers to the experience of the sacred.” Human beings do not need to escape the secular world, but on the contrary, “the sacred beings are manifested through the mode of the profane beings.” We might, for example, “encounter with the Sacred” through “a stone, a tree, a dinner, a wedding, a birthday party, a hunting trip.”^①

These discussions include both elucidations by Western scholars based on literary classics, and responses and supplements to Tillich-Frye theories on the “ultimate”. Among them, Mark Larrimore introduces Horace Kallen’s long-forgotten but recently re-discussed article “Secularism as the Common Religion of a Free Society.”^②

^① Mircea Eliade, *Histoire des croyances et des idées religieuses II: De Gautama Bouddha au triomphe du christianisme*, trans. WU Jingyi, et al., Vol. 1 (Taipei: Cite Publishing Ltd., 2001), 26, 15.

^② Mark Larrimore, “Secularism as the Will of God: Horace Kallen’s ‘Hebraic’ Understanding of the Pluralism as an Ultimate Concern,” trans. CHEN Long, in this issue.

What is worth noting is that both Kallen's "religious secularism" and Robert Bellah's "Civil Religion" might have affirmed the theoretical proposition Tillich was facing, that "the theological 'answers' that such theologies offer are substantively shaped by the 'questions' posed by the secular culture itself."^① Kallen's teacher, William James' critique of the "second-hand pieties" of institutionalized faith traditions is practically identical to Frye's criticism of "secondary concern." This reminds us once again that the "ultimate" becomes a question through a fundamental doubt of "infallible authority," but should not be a means for some kind of self-legitimizing under the guise of the "sacred". It is for this reason we have the "ultimate," and not the "secondary" or "second-hand," and why this "concern" that originated in religious belief can be expanded or extended transcendently. As Larrimore says, "The greatest barrier to religion turns out to be the idea that religious truth is and must be fixed once for all."^②

There is a well-known stanza in British Poet William Blake's poem "Auguries of Innocence":

To see a World in a Grain of Sand,
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower.
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,
And Eternity in an hour.^③

A Chinese reader, on reading these lines, will recall the verses in the Avatamsaka Sutra, "To see a World in a Flower, and a Bohdi in a leaf," (一花一世界, 一叶一菩提) and so Blake's poem was translated into a classical five-character poem form (一沙一世界, 一花一天堂, 无限手中握, 刹那是永恒). Looking back on Tang Dynasty poet Zhang Ruoxu's poem "A Moonlit Night On The Spring River" (春江花月夜), we find similar resonances between Chinese and others, modern and ancient. When the poet sighs, "Whose man tonight rowing the boat is he? Where in moon-lit

^① Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, Vol. 2, 153.

^② See page 14 of this issue.

^③ William Blake, "Auguies of Innocence," in *Songs of Innocence and Experience: with Other Poems* (London: Basil Montagu Pickering, 1866), 96.

bower love-sick is she?” (谁家今夜扁舟子，何处相思明月楼) we sense the hum of worldly attachments, while in the lines, “Who’s first to see the moon on the riverside? And when did the moon on man first shed light?”^① (江畔何人初见月，江月何年初照人) we find eternal questions inspired by cosmic phenomena that cut straight to the heart and mind.

To experience the “infinite” through the “finite” and to look back on the “profane” from the “holy” can be regarded as two opposite yet complementary dimensions, whose ultimate direction is aligned: to establish genuine hope by “pozhi 破执” (breaking through the ego) and to experience the spiritual sublime of “coming back with an empty boat loaded with bright moonlight” in the mundane experience when “Year after year the moon looks all alike.” This is the “Ultimate Concern” of literature and philosophy.

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^① There are many translations of this famous poem. This version is anonymously published online. Please see <http://www.nxsby.com/aiqing/aiqingshi/2015-11-27/2793.html>. – Translators’ note.

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