The Relevance of Tillich's Existential Theology to Culturally-Informed Existential Psychotherapy

Abstract

This paper explores the clinical relevance of Paul Tillich's existential theology to existential psychotherapy, particularly with clients from cross-culturally and spiritually complex backgrounds. Existential therapy is often criticized for its philosophical plurality and lack of cohesion, yet its richness lies in its capacity to hold multiple truths in tension. As an atheist, I engage Tillich not in spite of, but because of, his theologically grounded existentialism—a framework that transcends rigid binaries between faith and secularity, individualism and collectivism, West and East.

Focusing on three of Tillich's central ideas—participation and individuation, three ontological anxieties, and the *God above God*—this paper traces the existential impact of belief systems on moral guilt, meaninglessness, and cultural alienation. These concepts are grounded in a clinical case study of a Muslim client navigating exile, homosexuality, and spiritual shame. Through this lens, I argue that Tillich's theology offers a compassionate, inclusive bridge between philosophical abstraction and embodied experience. This paper invites existential practitioners to resist ideological imposition and return to existential therapy's core: meeting clients in the full complexity of their being.

Keywords: counseling; courage; cross-cultural; cultural competence; diversity; existential psychotherapy; existential therapy; psychology of religion; spirituality; homo-sexual

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> I have entirely rejected the opposition between [competing philosophies], I believe everything is layered and multi-layered and diverse. It isn't binary, it's never binary but it's always complex […] all of it is true in some way. Our challenge is to fit all of that together and to understand how we create a pattern of meaning that we can thrive on and enjoy living with (van Deurzen, 2018).

Existential therapy has drawn criticism for being convoluted by heterogeneous ideas and lacking in a unified, mechanized model (Keshen, 2006). To reduce the rich tapestry of philosophy to a reductionist treatment model is to miss the point of existential thought entirely. Philosophers are, first and foremost, human beings, each embedded in a context, and their works reflect those contexts. As an existential psychotherapist, I am interested in the layers and overlaps within their perspectives that reveal universal truths about human existence. The nuanced divergences of their views matter for the insight they offer into working with clients whose worldviews and experiences may resonate more with certain existential framings than others.

Paul Tillich's (1952) *The Courage to Be* is a striking example. While existential psychotherapy has long drawn from Heidegger, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Sartre, Tillich's contributions remain less recognized. The radical conceptions of freedom developed by classical existentialists often include strong critiques of religion as systems that pre-empt existential questioning, impose moral structures, and suppress individual inquiry. But each of these thinkers writes from their own cultural and historical context, which is evident in the way they conceive of cultural belief and religion. Their emphasis on radical freedom and responsibility may, at times, diminish the importance of cultural beliefs and feel inaccessible or even alienating to clients whose identities are deeply interwoven with faith, community, and inherited spiritual traditions.

Tillich, by contrast, demonstrates greater reverence and understanding for such traditions. His existential theology – rooted in anthropological sensitivity – recognizes that

assumptions about existence vary across cultures. People encounter existential anxiety not in a universal form, but through culturally and historically situated frameworks of meaning. In doing so, Tillich makes existential thought accessible to clients and practitioners who do not identify with atheistic or secular existential frameworks and provides unique insight into conceptualizing their life stance.

I write this essay as an atheist. Tillich's work matters to me precisely because it speaks to those who do not fit neatly into either secular or religious categories. I argue that Tillich's existential theology provides an essential framework for engaging with clients across belief systems, particularly those struggling with religious and moralistic backgrounds. Through an analysis of three of his key ideas – [1] participation and individuation, [2] meaninglessness and condemnation, and [3] the God above God – I will demonstrate the relevance of Tillich's work to existential psychotherapy in conceptualizing clients from diverse cultures and religions. These discussions are grounded in the case study of Rahim (see van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2019, p. 181-197); while the content remains faithful to the original text, the vignettes have been edited for length and coherence.

Participation & Individuation (Tillich, 1952, p. 86-88)

For Tillich, ontological principles are inherently polar, shaped by the fundamental tension between being and non-being. As courage is man's self-affirmation of being in spite of nonbeing, the tension between the *self* and its *world* is inescapable. The self as *self* is a separate, incomparable, free, and self-determining self. But this *self* only exists because it has a *world* to which it belongs and from which it is, simultaneously, separate. To conform to the world risks losing the self, while complete individuation risks isolation. Thus, participation is always paradoxical: both a partial identity and partial nonidentity.

> Rahim is a Persian man of 42, well-groomed and affluent. At 30, he had fallen desperately in love with an older man, Firouz. Despite their secrecy, their relationship

> was discovered. Rahim's father claimed Firouz was an exploitative pedophile, a lie that bought Rahim's freedom and saw Firouz hanged. Rahim fled his home country.
>
> Now in the UK, Rahim weeps with the shame that his family now lives in. He had hurt so many people, and it was best for him to stay away from others for fear of wronging them again. His deep and unending sorrow at his fate had plunged him into isolation.

Rahim's participation in Persian culture was violently severed when his sexuality led to dishonor and exile. Yet, to forgo his love for Firouz would have fractured his individuality. Unable to reconcile the two, he has withdrawn from human relationships, forsaking both participation in his community and his individuation.

Like Tillich, Heidegger (1927/1962, p. 465) argues that humans are *thrown* (Geworfenheit) into a world not of our choosing and embedded in social contexts. Sartre describes this condition as our *facticity*. But while Tillich seeks to balance the *self* and *world*, Heidegger and Sartre may take a more radical stance. Sartre may argue that Rahim is living in bad faith, a form of self-deception where individuals evade their freedom by conforming to imposed roles (Sartre, 1943/2003). Heidegger sees authentic existence as taking responsibility for one's being despite external conditions. He may insist that Rahim engages with *thrownness* not through passive regret but in *resoluteness (*Entschlossenheit) (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 343). Yet, Heidegger's account of *resoluteness* – as taking radical responsibility for our thrown condition and its possibilities – may not adequately account for the profundity of cultural and religious beliefs, which are often experienced as ontological givens about the universe. Heidegger describes:

> The "they" has always kept Dasein from taking hold of these possibilities of Being. The "they" even hides the manner in which it has tacitly relieved Dasein of the burden of explicitly *choosing* these possibilities (p. 268)

Heidegger is correct: ingrained tradition, cultural, religious, and spiritual beliefs may relieve individuals from the burden of questioning. However, there is an overtone of blame, that the

"they" is somehow complicit in covering freedom, which may unfairly cast cultural belonging as self-deceptive. He goes on to say that as one comes to feel guilty, we are brought back from the loud "idle talk" which goes with the "common-sense" of the "they" (p. 342).

I do not believe that those of devout belief or faith see their traditions as "idle talk" or simple "common-sense." Often, religious doctrines were written and pursued as guidelines and ways of aiming to live a good life. I do not believe that Rahim would have resonated with the idea that his culture is simply idle common sense. The magnitude of his beliefs are apparent in the vehemence with which Rahim defends them:

> You can't just change my mind about that. I am not some kind of gay hero who can liberate Muslims. I don't share your perverse perspective on the world […] You are a liberated, tolerant Western intellectual who will try to accept and welcome almost anything. But that is a problem, is it not? That's how the world descends into chaos. Liberal philosophies are the enemy of order and morals, and religion.

To Rahim, in his world, these are not idle beliefs; the are understood and taken as an ontological basis for his world.

Even Sartre (1944/1976) acknowledges that we do not escape our heritage: "And the Jew does not escape this rule: authenticity for him is to live to the full of his condition as a Jew; inauthenticity is to deny it or to attempt to escape from it" (p. 65). Yet, in the case of Rahim to live authentically as gay and as a Muslim Iranian is incompatible. To be authentically gay in his culture, his home, is to cease to be at all. There is nothing "idle" in the ingrained religious and cultural beliefs, which are so incompatible with the "they".

Thinkers who recognise the deeper implications of intersectionality are better poised to grasp the gravitas of systemic oppression and ingrained culture. De Beauvoir (1949/2015) highlighted that the freedom of a woman operates in different bounds to the freedom of a man, "…her wings are cut and then she is blamed for not knowing how to fly" (p. 731). Likewise, the freedom for a gay Iranian is not the freedom of a heterosexual Iranian. There is

no learning to fly for a gay man in Iran. Fanon (1952/2008) points out that the oppressed will always believe the worst of themselves, feel that they are ontologically flawed for simply being as they are, which leaves them in, "Shame. Shame and self-contempt. Nausea" (p. 93). This sentiment captures the tension within Rahim. Freedom is not a readily available existential fact, but a fragile and negotiated possibility.

To uphold existential freedom as a universally applicable doctrine can become a form of bullying. We each write from a viewpoint. As middle-class, heterosexual, white males living in an era where the iron grip of religion was dissolving, Sartre and Heidegger write from the viewpoint where they were at liberty to conceive of freedom from positions where such autonomy was socially plausible. Sartre, in particular, was a product of bourgeois liberty. For individuals such as Rahim, claims of 'bad faith' risk becoming moralistic and blameful or even oppressive if not grounded in an understanding of the risks, losses, and relational fractures with oneself and one's world entailed in 'choosing' freely.

In contrast to this extreme individualism, Levinas (1961, p. 45) radically reorients the discourse, asserting that ethical existence begins not with self-affirmation but with responsibility to the Other. For Rahim, such responsibility may lie not in self-liberation but in an act of culturally situated reparation toward his family, his beliefs, his past, or Firouz in response to the pain that he has witnessed and been part.

Tillich occupies a middle ground. His framework neither dismisses the weight of cultural structures nor negates the individual's need for self-affirmation. Rather, he offers a kind of existential anthropology – an account of what it means to be human that spans diverse cultural and historical contexts, from individualist to collectivist orientations. He shows greater reverence for the tensions between affirming ourselves as individuals and the gravity of cultural-historical contexts which shape our experience of ontological givens.

Ontological Anxieties (Tillich, 1952, p. 40-54)

Tillich distinguishes three ways nonbeing threatens man's ontic, spiritual, and moral self-affirmation. These manifest as anxieties of fate and death (ontic), emptiness and meaninglessness (spiritual), and guilt and condemnation (moral). The first arises from our awareness of mortality and the finitude of our existence—the ever-present uncertainty that threatens our very being. The second confronts us with the void of purposelessness in a universe that offers no inherent meaning. The third strikes at the core of our ethical selfhood: we are both actor and judge, perpetually answerable to ourselves for how we have lived and who we have become.

> There is no way to stop Rahim believing that he owes a debt, he will not accept that he is blameless in the face of hypocrisy and cultural habits that are outdated. His religion is deeply rooted within him and is a source of confusion and self-recrimination. The enemy was not just out there… it was within himself in the shape of his own belief system. He was the one who thought he was bad for loving men and for not being strong enough to die for his love if he must love a man.
> […]
> One day, Rahim told me, shyly, and with some amount of trepidation that it was his physical closeness to Firouz that had made him feel truly close to God and that he could not understand this. I remarked that it sounded as if Firouz had been like the representation of God on earth and this left a deafening silence between us.
> […]
> He became fiercer, more outspoken. I met a different person the day he told me he had started meeting other men. Rahim found a group of Muslim gay men but tells me that these guys are living in hypocrisy. Most of them live sham lives and happily worship at the mosque whilst betraying their principles.

Having escaped death, Rahim remains trapped between condemnation and meaninglessness. His self-condemnation stems from the guilt imposed by religious and personal values, as he feels answerable both to himself and to God. At the same time, his relationship with Firouz gave him an embodied experience of meaning and acceptance; without it, he faces a spiritual emptiness. His suffering does not arise from Islamic faith itself, but from the irreconcilable conflict between his internalized belief system and his desires. Tillich speaks of the *acceptance of acceptance* (p. 160-171) – yet Rahim cannot accept being accepted – not by others, nor by himself – because doing so would collapse the moral order

by which he was raised, leaving him unmoored from any framework that can justify his being.

Van Deurzen's commitment to exploring Rahim's life stance juxtaposes causal behavioral and psychoanalytic approaches (Schneider, 2019). Existential therapy has been criticized as plagued by a lack of consistency, coherency, and scrutiny (Norcross, 1987), yet to delve exclusively into Rahim's past is to risk re-traumatization (Alexander, 2012), and to reduce his crisis to its pieces is not fairly reflective of the turmoil of his current life stance (Becker, 1973; Yalom, 1980, 2002). Here, a phenomenological, explorational discussion is not a dry abstraction; it is, for Rahim, existentially visceral, laden with embodied meaning.

Kierkegaard (1849/1941) describes "sickness unto death" where we no longer relate to ourselves or God. Rahim is frozen in his spiritual world, *Überwelt* (van Deurzen, 1984), the dimension of human existence in which our ultimate values and sense of meaning reside. This spiritual immobilization is akin to the numbness that follows immobility, the precipitating trauma response to freeze when neither fight nor flight is an option (Levine, 2010). Tillich's ontological anxieties conceptualize the nature of this paralysis. Trapped in a space between moral condemnation and existential meaninglessness, this ultimate despair *is* Rahim's disintegration – it is not just an abstract concept but a lived experience of threat to his very spiritual and moral *Being*.

The God above God (Tillich, p. 178-190)

Tillich argues that an anthropomorphic God creates a subject-object dichotomy, reducing both God and the self to mere objects (see also Buber, 1937). In this state, God appears as an invincible tyrant, and the believer a mortal sinner. This is the very deity that Nietzsche (1882/1974) declared must die, for no one can tolerate being reduced to a mere object.

Tillich asserts that the God above this God is hidden yet present in all of life. When traditional symbols of courage fail, courage returns as the absolute faith that says YES to being in the absence of any concrete power to conquer fate or absolve our guilt. However, "The courage to take the anxiety of meaninglessness upon ourselves is the boundary line up to which the courage-to-be can go. Beyond it is mere non-being […] The courage to be is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared into the anxiety of doubt" (p. 190).

> Rahim remained secretive with regards to the subject of religion. He did not trust my secular stance and was deeply suspicious of my philosophical background. As I see Rahim struggling with his guilt about his religion all the time, I become aware that I may need to press him on the issue that he is not confronting.
>
> We agree that what he calls God is the utmost power in the universe – a fair and lawful power, not one that seeks to punish. Rahim begins exploring new ways of practicing Islam that allow him to be less damning and more open to reconciliation between West and East, science and religion.
>
> He knows a way must be found and does so quickly, and all by himself, by finding a different group of gay but devotedly Muslim men in London. Amongst them are men from Albania, Bosnia, and Turkey with more liberal interpretations of the Koran and Hadith. He discovers medieval Islamic verses praising homosexuality and is enchanted. As his views relax, so does his whole way of being with me.

Rahim's upbringing was shaped by a punitive God**,** rendering him an object of divine judgment and societal condemnation**.** Challenged in therapy not to shun, but critically examine his inherited beliefs, he deconstructed this anthropomorphic God. His doubt led to a renewed understanding of the divine. His new understanding reaffirmed his courage to be – an absolute faith in saying 'yes' to being. In doing so, he re-engaged with the community and faith that gave him meaning. In this, he can *accept acceptance*; he is no longer condemned.

Rather than religious doctrine, Tillich's work aligns with Frankl's (1946/2008) logotherapy, which positions meaning-making as a source of strength to endure suffering. He echoes *Amor Fati,* Nietzsche's (1888/1992) call to affirm all that comes our way in life, including suffering, not as a masochistic acceptance, but as part of a broader affirmation of life in all its complexity and contingency. Tillich parallels the central tenet in modern

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy – that we help clients facilitate acceptance of our embodied experience while taking committed action toward value-based living (Hayes et al., 2016). Religion, belief, and spirituality transform, not because the accepted doctrines have changed, but through our shifting engagement with them – an engagement which has become open to possibility, to interpretation, and individualised meaning. For Rahim, healing came from a culturally situated shift – a reconciliation with his faith by evolving it into something that did not disown integral parts of him, and through discovering a community of others who could affirm this reimagined, more livable faith.

Final Thoughts

If Tillich's conception of the divine is understood as an orientation toward an ultimate meaning or power that sustains us, then atheists too can engage with the God beyond God. A belief in the power driving the natural order—the inexorable passage of time, the laws of physics, the elegance of evolution that has produced the intricate mechanisms of biological life, and the consistency of subatomic behavior—represents forces beyond our control, yet they underpin our existence and reality. One need not invoke the supernatural to experience awe, reverence, or an existential engagement with something greater than the self. If this is Tillich's meaning of the God above God, then perhaps I, the ardent atheist, am not an atheist at all. In this sense, the God beyond God is not a divine being but the very structure of existence itself.

Tillich, the "unbelieving theologian" (Farris, 2024) offers a framework that transcends theistic and atheistic binaries, providing a means of opening conversations with clients who hold deeply ingrained beliefs about a higher power and conceptualizing their suffering. If existential therapy is to remain truly inclusive, it must engage with frameworks like Tillich's, which offer a kinder, less radical, and more nuanced bridge between collectivism and

individualism, West and East, religion and philosophy. As Tillich's *God beyond God* transcends the limits of anthropomorphic theology, so too must existential therapists move beyond ideological debates. Are we truly meeting our clients where they are, or are we unwittingly imposing another ideology? At what point does pushing the agenda of existential freedom become a form of bullying?

As van Deurzen was personally challenged in Rahim's case, Tillich's text challenges practitioners to have the courage to confront and re-examine the East-West dichotomies embedded in their thinking. To what extent are we complicit in Western cultural narratives that masquerade as individualist freedom but have become a form of pseudo-religion? Have the ideological certainties of political correctness tainted our vision in ways that blind us to the deep, lived differences of those from other cultures? If existential therapy is to remain true to its principles, we must resist the comfort of our ideological bubbles and acknowledge the limitations of our supposed conceptions of freedom in connecting with clients in their worlds.

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