

What does Tillich mean by calling God the 'ground of being', and does this concept do justice to the Christian understanding of God?

Paul Tillich's claim that God is the 'ground of being'¹ has profound resonance with classical Christian theology, even though the way he expresses it often sounds radical and—at times—even atheistic. His insistence that God is 'being-itself, not *a* being',² and that God does not 'exist' in the ordinary sense, appears at first sight to conflict with the Christian confession of the living God. Yet Tillich's purpose is not to deny God's reality, but to resist any account of God which reduces him to one object within the totality of beings. The question, then, is whether this ontological language does justice to the Christian understanding of God. This essay argues that Tillich's doctrine substantially retrieves the classical Christian insight that God is not one being among others, but the transcendent ground upon which all finite being depends. In this respect, his thought has significant resonance with Exodus 3:14, Pseudo-Dionysian apophatic theology, and Aquinas's account of God as subsistent being itself. Nevertheless, that continuity does not remove all difficulty. Tillich's resistance to ordinary existence-language, together with his symbolic treatment of divine attributes, raises unresolved questions about whether his account can fully preserve the concrete personal and revelatory character of the God confessed by Christianity.

Tillich's doctrine of God as the ground of being must first be understood as an ontological claim rather than as a denial of God's reality. His assertion that God does not 'exist' appears, at first sight, to collapse into atheism, since ordinary Christian speech typically affirms that God exists. Yet Tillich's argument depends upon a distinction between God and finite beings. He is not claiming that God is unreal; he is rejecting the assumption that God belongs within the totality of things that exist.³ To speak of God as one existent being among others, even as the highest or most powerful being, would be to place God within the same ontological field as creatures. Within Tillich's framework, this would already compromise the meaning of God, since the ground of all being cannot itself be one being within the order that it grounds.

Central to this account is Tillich's analysis of human finitude. Human beings do not possess existence in a self-grounding way, but experience

¹ Tillich states that, in the doctrine of God, 'God is called being as being or the ground and the power of being'. See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Three Volumes in One* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1967), vol. II, p. 10.

² Ibid., vol. I, p. 237.

³ Robert R. N. Ross argues that Tillich's claim, although seemingly suggestive of 'some form of a-theology', does not represent a denial of divine reality. He maintains that Tillich's intention is to affirm 'one of the important doctrines of classical Christianity': that God cannot be understood as a finite entity within the order of beings. See Robert R. N. Ross, 'The Non-Existence of God: Tillich, Aquinas, and the Pseudo-Dionysius', *The Harvard Theological Review*, 68.2 (1975), 141–166 (p. 141).

themselves as finite, contingent, and threatened by nonbeing.⁴ The question of God therefore arises not from curiosity about whether there is an additional object called 'God', but from the structure of finite existence itself.⁵ Tillich accordingly writes that 'God is the answer to the question implied in human finitude'.⁶ This does not mean that God is *produced* by human anxiety, but that the *meaning* of God becomes intelligible in relation to the existential question raised by finitude. Finite beings stand under the threat of nonbeing, and God names the ground and power by which being is sustained against that threat.⁷

This is why Tillich can describe God as 'the infinite power of being which resists the threat of nonbeing'.⁸ God is not one instance of being alongside others, but the inexhaustible depth from which all finite beings receive their being. His most compressed formulation is therefore also his most controversial: 'God is being-itself, not a being'.⁹ The statement is not intended to render God abstract or impersonal, but to prevent God from being reduced to a finite object of thought. Created things may be spoken of as existing because they participate in being in a limited and dependent way. God, by contrast, is not a participant in being but being-itself—the ground upon which all participation depends.

For Tillich, to ask whether God 'exists' risks treating God as an object whose reality might be affirmed or denied in the same sense as other objects.¹⁰ His denial that God 'exists' is therefore anti-idolatrous—not atheistic—for it seeks to protect divine transcendence by refusing to make God a supreme member of the world. Nevertheless, this protection of transcendence also introduces the central difficulty of his doctrine: if God is spoken of primarily as being-itself, ground, or power of being, it remains necessary to

⁴ Tillich defines anxiety as 'the existential awareness of nonbeing' and as 'finitude, experienced as one's own finitude' (p. 35). He therefore describes this anxiety as 'the anxiety of nonbeing, the awareness of one's finitude as finitude' (p. 36). See Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 35–36.

⁵ Tillich's wider account of faith supports this existential framing of the God-question. He defines faith as 'the state of being ultimately concerned' which occurs 'in the center of the personal life'. Faith is therefore the centred orientation of the whole person towards what concerns them ultimately. See Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), p. 4.

⁶ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, p. 64.

⁷ Tillich argues that 'the basic anxiety, the anxiety of a finite being about the threat of nonbeing, cannot be eliminated', because '[i]t belongs to existence itself' (p. 39). He then connects this threat of nonbeing to the ground and power of being, arguing that 'religion is the state of being grasped by the power of being-itself' and describing the question as concerning 'the ground of being as source of the courage to be' (p. 156). He later adds that '[t]here is no self-affirmation of a finite being, and there is no courage to be in which the ground of being and its power of conquering nonbeing is not effective' (p. 160). See Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, pp. 39, 156, 160.

⁸ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, p. 64.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

¹⁰ Tillich argues that 'God never can be object without being at the same time subject'. In the experience of the ultimate, he claims, the ordinary 'subject-object scheme' disappears, since the source of faith is present 'beyond the cleavage of subject and object'. See Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, p. 11.

ask whether Tillich can still do justice to the living, personal, and self-revealing God confessed by the Christian faith.

Tillich's claim that God is being-itself, not *a* being, can be understood as an attempt to preserve the classical Christian conviction that God transcends the order of finite beings. Read alongside Exodus 3:14, Tillich's doctrine reveals a significant resonance with the biblical presentation of God as fundamentally distinguished from the created order. When Moses asks God what name he should give to the Israelites, God replies: "I AM WHO I AM". This expresses a theological intuition later developed more systematically within Christian reflection, since God is not presented as one being within creation, nor as one confined to some category of being within creation, but as the one who transcends all genera.¹¹

In Exodus 3:14, God's self-naming resists classification within the created order. God is not defined by membership in a genus, nor does he receive his existence from another source. The point is not that God is merely one example of being among others, but that God is the source upon which all finite beings depend.¹² To be a tree is to be a tree; to be a stone is to be a stone; but to be God is to *be*. God is the fullness of being itself—not one instance of being alongside others. In this respect, the biblical language of divine self-identification provides an important point of resonance with Tillich's claim that God is the ground of all being.

This same theological conviction appears in Scripture's presentation of divine incomprehensibility in passages which speak to the ineffability of God. In Exodus 33:20, Moses is told that he cannot see God's face, "for no one shall see me and live". John 1:18 makes the same point more directly: "No one has ever seen God". The point is not that God is unreal or unknowable in every sense, but that God transcends all our categories and cannot be made fully amenable to creaturely comprehension. On that basis, to confine God to the level of a category which may or may not exist would already be problematic. These passages therefore prepare the way for the apophatic tradition developed by Pseudo-Dionysius, in which God is spoken of truly, but never comprehensively. Exodus 3:14 does not establish Tillich's doctrine of the ground of being directly, but it demonstrates that the Christian tradition itself contains resources for affirming divine transcendence beyond the categories of created existence.

¹¹ Aquinas develops this point in his discussion of whether God belongs to a genus, arguing that 'in neither way is God in a genus'. Since 'the existence of God is His essence', God cannot be contained within the genus of being, for 'being cannot be a genus'. Aquinas therefore concludes that 'God is not in a genus', since God is 'the principle of all being' and is therefore 'not contained in any genus as its principle'. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, vol. 1 (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1947), Ia, q. 3, art. 5, resp., p. 18.

¹² Ross makes this distinction by drawing upon Aquinas's account of God's unique nature. Whereas 'every being that is . . . some *kind* of thing . . . is a *created* being' and 'has its being from something *other* than itself', God has his being '*not* from something other than himself'. Ross therefore concludes: 'Only God, then, is the being whose nature is *primarily* to be', since God is 'not some *kind* of thing' but existence itself. See Ross, 'The Non-Existence of God', p. 154.

Tillich's terminology is radical, and his language provocative, but the concern behind it is already present within classical apophatic theology. This becomes clearer when his claim that God is 'beyond essence and existence'¹³ is read alongside Pseudo-Dionysius, who is known precisely for saying radical things about the limitations of how we can talk about God. Dionysius does not deny God; he insists that God exceeds the finite predicates by which creatures ordinarily name and classify reality.¹⁴ Even names such as 'being' and 'goodness' must be understood as pointing beyond themselves, since no created concept can fully map onto what is meant by God's transcendence over all things.

This is why Dionysius is so important for understanding the Christian background to Tillich's claim. Part of the difficulty is that, when one says something 'exists', existence is usually being attributed to some thing-hood—some particularised mode of being. Applied to God without qualification, that way of speaking risks confining the otherwise uncircumscribed divine life to the level of a finite category. This is why Dionysius's language becomes so radical. He speaks of God as beyond naming, beyond knowledge, and beyond the ordinary conditions under which created things exist or are known.

His point is not that God is unreal, but that God cannot be spoken of as existing in the manner of any being.¹⁵ Tillich can therefore be read as translating this apophatic instinct into modern existential-ontological language.¹⁶ Where Dionysius says that God is beyond affirmation and denial, Tillich says that both affirming and denying God's existence risk misunderstanding God as a being among beings¹⁷—to 'bring him down to the level of a thing in the world'.¹⁸ Tillich's refusal to say straightforwardly that God 'exists' therefore reflects a recognisably Christian concern—that God must not be reduced to one object within the totality of beings. The God beyond being

¹³ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, p. 236.

¹⁴ Pseudo-Dionysius describes God as 'super-essentially above all existence' and as 'the substantial Cause and Creator of Being, Existence, Substance and Nature'. He therefore states that God is 'not Existent in any ordinary sense', but embraces and anticipates 'all existence in Himself'. Aquinas receives this Dionysian claim, presenting God as 'not something existing', but 'super-existence', exceeding the ordinary conditions under which created things are known. See Dionysius, *The Divine Names* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2010), IV.4, p. 135; and Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 12, art. 1, obj. 3, p. 49.

¹⁵ Ross notes that it would be misleading to suggest that Pseudo-Dionysius 'denies God's existence', since God is more properly said to be 'not existing but "super-existing"', as '[t]he transcendent Godhead does not belong to the category of existence' or to 'the category of non-existence'. See Ross, 'The Non-Existence of God', p. 146.

¹⁶ Ross explicitly connects Tillich's later concern with this earlier apophatic tradition, arguing that Tillich 'was not the first Christian theologian to see that there might arise some semantic necessity for suggesting that God does not "exist"'. Ross reads Dionysius's claim as arising from 'the finiteness of the human mind and the limits of possible knowledge of God', since God is 'beyond what is there'. See *Ibid.*, p. 142.

¹⁷ See *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹⁸ Paul Tillich, 'The Idea of God as Affected by Modern Knowledge', *Crane Review*, 1.3 (1959), 83–89 (p. 87).

most associated with Dionysius is not identical to Tillich's ground of being, but the two accounts clearly share the same refusal to confine God within finite categories.

This does not mean that Dionysius and Tillich are saying exactly the same thing: Dionysius is operating within a liturgical, hierarchical, Neoplatonic, and explicitly mystical Christian framework, whereas Tillich is operating within modern existential and apologetic theology. Dionysius is not answering the modern problem of God's existence in the same way as Tillich. Even so, the comparison shows that Tillich's doctrine of God as the ground of being is more continuous with Christian tradition than many of its critics suppose. He retrieves a genuinely classical insight—that God is not one being among others, but the transcendent ground of being.

Aquinas gives this apophatic concern a more precise metaphysical form through his distinction between essence and existence. Aquinas and Tillich agree that God is not a finite being who receives existence. For Aquinas, created things possess existence derivatively: *what* they are and *that* they are are not identical. One can understand what a man is, or what a phoenix is, without thereby knowing whether either exists in reality.¹⁹ A creature therefore has an essence which may or may not be actualised by existence; it is a thing which receives existence. God, by contrast, is not an essence that receives existence from another. What is unique about God is that this distinction does not hold in him. His essence is none other than to exist.

This is the central claim of Aquinas's doctrine of God as *ipsum esse subsistens*. Aquinas writes: 'There is a reality, God, whose essence is his very being'.²⁰ God does not have being as one property among others; God is subsistent being itself. Yet Aquinas is careful to distinguish God as pure being from 'universal being': God is not the common being formally shared by creatures, but pure being whose simplicity makes him distinct from every created act of being.²¹ From this, Aquinas concludes that God is not contained within a genus, since everything within a genus has a quiddity or nature distinct from its existence. In this respect, Aquinas gives classical expression to the same fundamental distinction that Tillich preserves. God is not one being among others—nor even the highest instance within a class of existing things—but the precondition for the existence of anything whatsoever.

Fran O'Rourke's reading of Dionysius and Aquinas helps clarify this point. Aquinas's metaphysics of *esse* does not abandon the Dionysian concern with

¹⁹ Aquinas makes this distinction by arguing that 'every essence or quiddity can be understood without knowing anything about its being'. One can know 'what a man or a phoenix is' while remaining ignorant of 'whether it has being in reality'. From this Aquinas concludes that 'being is other than essence or quiddity, unless perhaps there is a reality whose quiddity is its being'. See Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, trans. by Armand Maurer (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1968), ch. 4, para. 6, p. 55.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, ch. 5, para. 1, p. 61.

²¹ Aquinas guards against the misunderstanding that God as pure being is merely 'that universal being by which everything formally exists'. He insists that '[t]he being that is God is such that no addition can be made to it' and that, '[b]ecause of its purity', it is 'being distinct from all other being'. See *Ibid.*, ch. 5, para. 2, p. 61.

divine transcendence, but develops it into an account of participation. O'Rourke notes that Dionysius is 'frequently invoked by Aquinas' to explain the presence of *esse* throughout all things and 'the unified presence of all finite reality in God as the source of Being'.²² Finite beings exist by participation; God alone exists non-derivatively. This gives Tillich's language of God as being-itself a serious classical parallel.

The difference is that Aquinas still says that God 'exists'. He does not take the phrase itself to be the problem, provided divine existence is understood analogically and not univocally. Tillich, however, fears that saying 'God exists' almost inevitably places God on the same ontological level as creatures.²³ Ross is helpful here, since he shows that Tillich's denial that God is a being among others draws upon the classical doctrine that God's essence and existence are identical, even though Tillich radicalises that doctrine by refusing the language of divine existence altogether.²⁴

Tillich is therefore right to reject the reduction of God to one being among others, but he arguably overcorrects by treating the language of divine existence itself as the danger. Classical theology can affirm that God exists while denying that God exists in the same mode as creatures. Aquinas therefore strengthens Tillich's central intuition, but also shows why Tillich's refusal to speak straightforwardly of divine existence is not necessary to preserve divine transcendence.

Tillich's doctrine is continuous with the classical Christian understanding of divine transcendence. He rightly refuses to make God an object within the world or a highest being alongside lesser beings. Tillich's account therefore stands closer to the metaphysical instinct of classical Christian theology than some contemporary approaches which resist strong divine simplicity out of concern for divine personality and agency. His concern is that such accounts risk placing God within the same ontological field as creatures, whereas God must be understood as the ground upon which all finite being depends. God is not one finite subject among others, but the ground on which all finite subjectivity, agency, and existence depend. This is why Tillich's account has significant resonance with the classical doctrine of divine simplicity. If God is the ground of being itself, then God cannot be composed of essence and

²² Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), p. 136.

²³ Tillich argues that 'the ground of being cannot be found within the totality of beings'. Although he accepts that '[t]he scholastics were right when they asserted that in God there is no difference between essence and existence', he claims that they 'perverted their insight' when they nevertheless 'spoke of the existence of God and tried to argue in favour of it'. He therefore concludes: 'God does not exist. He is being-itself beyond essence and existence. Therefore, to argue that God exists is to deny him'. See Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, p. 205.

²⁴ Ross argues that when Tillich says God is not a being, he has in mind 'essentially Aquinas' doctrine that God is utterly simple—the doctrine that God's essence and existence are identical because God "transcends" all genera'. Ross therefore reads Tillich's claim that God is not a being *among* others as reaffirming the classical theological claim that God does not fall under the category of substance, while also noting that Tillich comes to use 'exist' in a 'deliberately ambiguous way'. See Ross, 'The Non-Existence of God', p. 155.

existence, subject and predicate, or actuality and potentiality. God is not a being who possesses divinity as one attribute among others; he is the ground of all attributes and the source from which every finite perfection derives.²⁵

This also means that Tillich is not simply denying the personal character of God. He does not think God is a person in the same way that human beings are persons, but this is not the same as saying that God is less than personal. Tillich argues that 'personal God' does not mean that God is 'a person', but that God is 'the ground of everything personal' and 'not less than personal'.²⁶ This has significant overlap with classical theology. Aquinas likewise denies that God knows, wills, or loves in a creaturely mode. Divine intellect and will cannot be separate faculties within a larger divine subject, because this would introduce composition into God.²⁷ Tillich is therefore right to resist crude anthropomorphism. The Christian God must not be reduced to a magnified human agent.

Nevertheless, this is also where Tillich's account becomes most theologically risky. The Christian understanding of God does not confess only an absolute ground, but the living God who knows, loves, wills, acts, reveals himself, and becomes incarnate. Tillich's account can affirm some of this symbolically, but his symbolic method can make it unclear whether God truly knows, loves, wills, and acts, or whether such language merely expresses the depth-dimension of human existence. Tillich himself says that the statement that God is being-itself is non-symbolic, but that 'nothing else can be said about God as God which is not symbolic'.²⁸ This protects God from finite objectification, but it also means that personal and revelatory language appears less direct than the abstract claim that God is being-itself.

²⁵ Tillich's understanding of God has significant resonance with the classical doctrine of divine simplicity, although this doctrine has been questioned by some contemporary theologians. William Lane Craig, for example, defines the doctrine as the claim that God 'transcends the distinction between a thing and its properties', such that 'God is identical to His properties, and all His properties are identical with one another'. Craig's objection raises difficulties for divine personality and agency, since 'if God is identical to His properties, then God is an abstract object, which is absurd'. This objection represents a contemporary challenge to classical divine simplicity: that identifying God's attributes with the divine essence may appear to threaten the personal agency traditionally attributed to God. Tillich's account, however, preserves the classical metaphysical instinct that God is not a being who possesses attributes as properties added to his essence, but the ground of all finite perfections. See William Lane Craig, *God Over All: Divine Aseity and the Challenge of Platonism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 64.

²⁶ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, p. 245.

²⁷ Aquinas argues that divine intellect and will are not creaturely faculties added to God; they are identical with God's simple act of being. In his treatment of the human intellect, Aquinas notes by contrast that 'in God alone His action of understanding is His very Being', and therefore 'in God alone is His intellect His essence: while in other intellectual creatures, the intellect is a power' (Ia, q. 79, art. 1, resp., p. 397). With respect to will, he likewise maintains that 'there must be will in God, since there is intellect in Him', and that 'as His intellect is His own existence, so is His will' (Ia, q. 19, art. 1, resp., p. 103). Aquinas also affirms that love exists in God, since 'will is in God' and therefore 'we must attribute love to Him' (Ia, q. 20, art. 1, resp., p. 114); yet this love is not a creaturely passion, for God 'loves without passion' (Ia, q. 20, art. 1, ad 1, p. 114). See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 79, art. 1, resp., p. 397; Ia, q. 19, art. 1, resp., p. 103; Ia, q. 20, art. 1, resp., p. 114; and Ia, q. 20, art. 1, ad 1, p. 114.

²⁸ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, p. 239.

For that reason, Tillich's doctrine only partially does justice to the Christian God. It powerfully retrieves a classical metaphysical truth: God is not one being among others, but the transcendent ground of being. Yet Christianity also requires that this ground be truly living, personal, free, loving, and self-revealing. Tillich avoids reducing God to a finite super-being, but his own language creates the opposite danger: in protecting divine transcendence, he risks weakening the concrete personal and revelatory character of the God confessed in Scripture and doctrine.

Tillich's doctrine of God as the ground of being therefore has profound resonance with the Christian understanding of God. His language sounds radical, even atheistic, but much of what he means has real overlap with classical apophatic and Thomistic theology. God is not a being but the sheer act of being itself: the ground of all being—not *a* being within reality. In this respect, Tillich retrieves a genuinely classical insight: God is not one being among others but the transcendent ground of being. Nevertheless, Tillich's terminology remains theologically risky. While he is right to reject any account of God that brings God down to the level of other creatures, he arguably exaggerates the danger of the phrase 'God exists'. Classical theology can say that God exists while denying that God exists in the same mode as creatures. The final difficulty is whether his account can fully preserve the Christian claim that God is not only the ground of being but the living, personal, and self-revealing God. Tillich's doctrine is therefore fundamentally compatible with Christian tradition, but not without real theological tension.

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