that, within itself, the finite world points beyond itself. In other words, it is self-transcendent.1

This, I believe, is Tillich's great contribution to theology—the reinterpretation of transcendence in a way which preserves its reality while detaching it from the projection of supranaturalism. 'The Divine, as he sees it, does not inhabit a transcendent world above nature; it is found in the ecstatic character of this world, as its transcendent Depth and Ground.'2 Indeed, as a recent commentator has observed, supranaturalism for Tillich actually represents 'a loss of transcendence':

It is the attempt to understand and express God's relation to the world by a literalization of this-worldly categories. ... The result is a God who exists as a being, above the world. ... Thus God is described as an entity within the subject-object structures of the spatial-temporal world.3

Or, as Tillich puts it himself:

To criticize such a conditioning of the unconditional, even if it leads to atheistic consequences, is more religious, because it is more aware of the unconditional character of the divine, than a theism that bans God into the supranatural realm.4

Nevertheless, the abandonment of any idea of a God 'out there' will inevitably appear a denial of his 'otherness' and the negation of much in the Biblical assertion of what Kierkegaard called 'the infinite qualitative difference between God and man'. It will be valuable therefore to look again at what the Bible is saying about the nature of God

4 *The Protestant Era*, p. 92.

and see how it can retain, and indeed regain, its deepest significance in the light of this reinterpretation.

God in the Bible

One of the most searching meditations in all literature on the meaning and presence of God is to be found in *Psalm* 139. Here, if anywhere, there is a sense of the utterly inescapable and surpassing wonder of God in every direction—above, beneath, behind and before. This Psalm is a *locus classicus* for the doctrine of the omnipotence and omniscience of God. It is from this source as much as from any other that traditional theology has constructed its picture of an all-powerful Being out there beyond us, who can do everything, who knows everything, and who watches all with unsleeping eye—a sort of celestial Big Brother. It is therefore instructive to see how a theologian of Tillich's views reinterprets such a passage.

He makes the point first of all that, though it may be difficult to avoid such concepts of a super-Being in religious thought and education, 'they are at least as dangerous as they are useful'. For

1 *The Shaking of the Foundations*, pp. 52 ff.
HONEST TO GOD

He then continues his profound meditation on this Psalm with the words:

Let us therefore forget these concepts, as concepts, and try to find their genuine meaning within our own experience. We all know that we cannot separate ourselves at any time from the world to which we belong. There is no ultimate privacy or final isolation. We are always held and comprehended by something that is greater than we are, that has a claim upon us, and that demands response from us. The most intimate motions within the depths of our souls are not completely our own. For they belong also to our friends, to mankind, to the universe, and to the Ground of all being, the aim of our life. Nothing can be hidden ultimately. It is always reflected in the mirror in which nothing can be concealed. Does anybody really believe that his most secret thoughts and desires are not manifest in the whole of being, or that the events within the darkness of his subconscious or in the isolation of his consciousness do not produce eternal repercussions? Does anybody really believe that he can escape from the responsibility for what he has done and thought in secret? Omniscience means that our mystery is manifest. Omnipresence means that our privacy is public. The centre of our whole being is involved in the centre of all being; and the centre of all being rests in the centre of our being. I do not believe that any serious man can deny that experience, no matter how he may express it. And if he has had the experience, he has also met something within him that makes him desire to escape the consequence of it. For man is not equal to his own experience; he attempts to forget it; and he knows that he cannot forget it.¹

And yet the Psalmist goes on to recognize that that which he is trying to escape is nothing alien to him.

The God whom he cannot flee is the Ground of his being. And this being, his nature, soul, and body, is a work of infinite wisdom, awful and wonderful. The admiration of the Divine Wisdom overcomes the horror of the Divine Presence in this passage. It points to the friendly presence of an infinitely creative wisdom. . . . There is a grace in life. Otherwise we could not live.²

God as the ground, source and goal of our being cannot but be represented at one and the same time as removed from the shallow, sinful surface of our lives by infinite distance and depth, and yet as nearer to us than our own selves. This is the significance of the traditional categories of transcendence and immanence.

The same paradoxical relationship of our lives to the deepest ground of our being is presented in the New Testament by St Paul's language about the Spirit of God and our spirits. 'Spirit'—as opposed to 'flesh', which is life in its shallowness and superficiality—speaks of that level of being and perception where the divine depths are to be known.

The Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what person knows a man's thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.³

But, St Paul continues, it is precisely this level of comprehension which is open to Christians:

We have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God . . . . The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. But we have the mind of Christ.⁴

And that this 'Spirit of God' is nothing alien to us but the very ground of our own true being is brought out in a further passage, for whose proper sense it is necessary to turn to the New English Bible:

In the same way the Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness. We do not even know how we ought to pray, but through our

¹ Op. cit., pp. 53 f. ² 1 Cor. 2.10 f. ³ 1 Cor. 2.12-16.
inarticulate groans the Spirit himself is pleading for us, and God who searches our inmost being knows what the Spirit means, because he pleads for God's own people in God's own way; and in everything, as we know, he cooperates for good with those who love God and are called according to his purpose.¹

In other words, the deepest groans of suffering of which the Apostle has been speaking,² so far from separating us from the source of our being in the love of God are in fact pointers to it, inarticulate sighs too deep for words, which the Spirit can take up and translate into prayer, because 'the Spirit' represents the link between the depths of our individual being (however shallow) and the unfathomable abyss of all being in God. God is not outside us, yet he is profoundly transcendent.

But for the Bible 'the deep things of God' cannot be plumbed, the transcendence of God cannot be understood, simply by searching the depths of the individual soul. God, since he is Love, is encountered in his fullness only 'between man and man'. And this is the burden of the whole Prophetic tradition—that it is only in response and obedience to the neighbour that the claims of God can be met and known. This message is focused in a passage to which I constantly find myself returning in the book of Jeremiah, where the prophet is addressing Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah:

Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says the Lord.³

God, the unconditional, is to be found only in, with and under the conditioned relationships of this life: for he is their depth and ultimate significance.

¹ Rom. 8.26-8. ² Rom. 8.18-23. ³ Jer. 22.15 f.

And this receives specifically Christian expression in the profoundly simple 'parable' of the Sheep and the Goats.¹ The only way in which Christ can be met, whether in acceptance or rejection, is through 'the least of his brethren'. The Son of Man can be known only in unconditional relationship to the son of man, to the one whose sole claim upon us is his common humanity. Whether one has 'known' God is tested by one question only, 'How deeply have you loved?'—for 'He who does not love does not know God; for God is love'.²

Now this links up with what Bonhoeffer was saying about a 'non-religious' understanding of God. For this ultimate and most searching question has nothing to do with 'religion'. It rests our eternal salvation upon nothing peculiarly religious. Encounter with the Son of Man is spelt out in terms of an entirely 'secular' concern for food, water supplies, housing, hospitals and prisons, just as Jeremiah had earlier defined the knowledge of God in terms of doing justice for the poor and needy. Indeed, in Macmurray's words, 'the great contribution of the Hebrew to religion was that he did away with it'.³ A right relationship to God depended on nothing religious: in fact religion could be the greatest barrier to it.⁴

The Way of the Irreligious

Our contention has been that God is to be met not by a 'religious' turning away from the world but in unconditional concern for 'the other seen through to its ultimate depths, that God is, to quote Macmurray again, the 'personal ground

¹ Matt. 25.31-46. ² 1 John 4.8. ³ Quoted by G. Macleod, Only One Way Left, p. 67; cf. J. Macmurray, The Clue to History (1938), Ch. II. ⁴ E.g., Amos 5.21-5.
of all that we experience." But this means, as he says, a
denial that encounter with him "rests upon some special
and extraordinary type of experience apart from which it
could not arise." That there are veridical experiences of
the type usually called "mystical" or "religious" no one would
be so foolish as to deny, and a man may thank God for
them as St Paul did for his visions. But the capacity for
religious or mystical awareness, as for aesthetic or psychic
awareness, is largely a question of natural endowment.
Women, for instance, appear to be naturally more religious
—and more psychic—than men. To make the knowledge of
God depend upon such experiences is like making it depend
on an ear for music. There are those who are tone-deaf,
and there are those who would not claim to have any clearly
distinguishable "religious" experiences: Oliver Chase Quick
was one of them, and he wrote one of the outstanding books
on Christian doctrine of our generation.

That God is the "depth" of common non-religious
experience is a point upon which John Wren-Lewis also
fastens in the account of his conversion. Belief in a personal
God came to him, he says, through the experience of
discovering in a community "the creative and "numinous"
power" inherent in ordinary personal relationships. And this
awareness, he believes, is open to anyone.

It is indeed one of my strongest convictions, which I insist
upon as the foundation for any apologetic work I set out to
do, that experience of this type is common to all human
beings. . . . Prayer and mystical vision are real and important,
but they cannot be the primary basis for religious conviction;
this must come from common experience, and special experi-
nences like prayer are only meaningful, in my view, insofar as
they refer back to common experience. But it is one thing to

say that religious propositions can be referred to the common
experience of the creative character of personal relationships:
it would be quite another to say that people commonly
recognize their experience of personal relationship for what it is
—an encounter with the Transcendent. Clearly they do not,
or there would be no need for religious apologetics—and
what was special about the group of people I met through this
Anglican clergyman was that he had led them to be aware of
the full religious significance of their relations with one
another.

In fact it began to dawn upon him what he had encountered
was actually an entirely different mode of living-in-relationship
from anything known in the world, a redeemed mode of
relationship in which the special energy Blake called "mutual
forgiveness" operated in a way that made the professional
"permissiveness" of the psychotherapist's consulting-room
seem a pale shadow in comparison.

It was, of course, a specifically Christian community,
manifesting what Tillich describes as the power of "the
new being". But it was not for that reason any the more
religious, based upon some new kind of esoteric or pietistic
experience. It was pointing through to God as the ground
of all personal relationship and all being, but insisting that
a man can only know that Love as the fount and goal of
his own life in so far as the alienation from the ground of
his being is overcome "in Christ". In traditional theological
terms, it was declaring that the way to "the Father"—to
acknowledgement of the "intimacy" of pure personal
relationship—is only "by the Son"—through the love of him
in whom the human is completely open to the divine—and
"in the Spirit"—within the reconciling fellowship of the new
community.

And this leads us directly into the reassessment, in this
whole context, of the person and work of Christ.

---

1 The Self as Agent, p. 17.
3 Doctrines of the Creed (1938).
4 They Became Anglicans, pp. 177 f.