THE GROUND OF OUR BEING

A Depth at the Centre of Life

The break with traditional thinking to which I believe we are now summoned is considerably more radical than that which enabled Christian theology to detach itself from a literal belief in a localized heaven. The translation from the God 'up there' to the God 'out there', though of liberating psychological significance, represented, as I have said, no more than a change of direction in spatial symbolism. Both conceptions presuppose fundamentally the same relationship between 'God' on the one hand and 'the world' on the other: God is a Being existing in his own right to whom the world is related in the sort of way the earth is to the sun. Whether the sun is 'above' a flat earth or 'beyond' a round one does not fundamentally affect the picture. But suppose there is no Being out there at all? Suppose, to use our analogy, the skies are empty?

Now it would again be possible to present the transposition with which we are concerned as simply a change in spatial metaphor. I quoted earlier the passage from Tillich in which he proposes replacing the images of 'height' by those of 'depth' in order to express the truth of God. And there is no doubt that this simple substitution can make much religious language suddenly appear more relevant. For we are familiar today with depth psychology, and with the idea that ultimate truth is deep or profound. Moreover, while 'spiritual wickedness in high places', and all the mythology of angelic powers which the Biblical writers
associate with it, seems to the modern man a fantastic
phantasmagoria, similar, equally mythological, language
when used by Freud of conflicts in the unconscious appears
perfectly acceptable.

And the change of symbolism has real and not merely
apparent psychological significance. For the category of 'depth'
has richer associations than that of height. As
Tillich points out:

'Deep' in its spiritual use has two meanings: it means either the
opposite of 'shallow', or the opposite of 'high'. Truth is deep
and not shallow; suffering is depth and not height. Both the
light of truth and the darkness of suffering are deep. There is
a depth in God, and there is a depth out of which the psalmist
cries to God.\(^1\)

And this double meaning may explain why 'depth' seems
to speak to us of concern while 'height' so often signifies
unconcern. The Epicurean gods, serene in their empyrean
above the cares and distractions of this world, are the epitome
of 'sublime' indifference. And Browning's supreme affirmation
of optimism, 'God's in his heaven; all's right with the
world', strikes the modern man somewhat more cynically.
For if God is 'above it all' he cannot really be involved.

Yet we are not here dealing simply with a change of
symbolism, important as that may be. This is not just the
old system in reverse, with a God 'down under' for a God
'up there'. When Tillich speaks of God in 'depth', he is not
speaking of another Being at all. He is speaking of 'the
infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being',
of our ultimate concern, of what we take seriously without
reservation. And after the passage I quoted earlier\(^2\) he goes
on to make the same point in relation not only to the depths

\(^1\) The Shaking of the Foundations, p. 60.

of our personal life but to the deepest springs of our social
and historical existence:

The name of this infinite and inexhaustible ground of history
is God. That is what the word means, and it is that to which the
words Kingdom of God and Divine Providence point. And if
these words do not have much meaning for you, translate them,
and speak of the depth of history, of the ground and aim of
our social life, and of what you take seriously without reserva-
tion in your moral and political activities. Perhaps you should
call this depth hope, simply hope. For if you find hope in the
ground of history, you are united with the great prophets who
were able to look into the depth of their times, who tried to
escape it, because they could not stand the horror of their
visions, and who yet had the strength to look to an even
deeper level and there to discover hope.\(^1\)

What Tillich is meaning by God is the exact opposite of
any deus ex machina, a supernatural Being to whom one
can turn away from the world and who can be relied upon
to intervene from without. God is not 'out there'. He is in
Bonhoeffer's words 'the beyond' 'in the midst of our life',
a depth of reality reached 'not on the borders of life but at
its centre',\(^2\) not by any flight of the alone to the alone, but,
in Kierkegaard's fine phrase, by 'a deeper immersion in
existence'. For the word 'God' denotes the ultimate depth
of all our being, the creative ground and meaning of all
our existence.

So conditioned for us is the word 'God' by associations
with a Being out there that Tillich warns us that to make
the necessary transposition, 'you must forget everything
traditional that you have learned about God, perhaps even
that word itself'.\(^3\) Indeed, the line between those who believe
in God and those who do not bears little relation to their

\(^2\) Op. cit., p. 64.
profession of the existence or non-existence of such a Being. It is a question, rather, of their openness to the holy, the sacred, in the unfathomable depths of even the most secular relationship. As Martin Buber puts it of the person who professedly denies God,

When he, too, who abhors the name, and believes himself to be godless, gives his whole being to addressing the Thou of his life, as a Thou that cannot be limited by another, he addresses God.1

For in the conditioned he has seen and responded to the unconditional. He has touched the hem of the eternal.

The difference between the two ways of thought can perhaps best be expressed by asking what is meant by speaking of a personal God. Theism, as the term was understood in the previous chapter, understands by this a supreme Person, a self-existent subject of infinite goodness and power, who enters into a relationship with us comparable with that of one human personality with another. The theist is concerned to argue the existence of such a Being as the creator and most sufficient explanation of the world as we know it. Without a Person 'out there', the skies would be empty, the heavens as brass, and the world without hope or compassion.

But the way of thinking we are seeking to expound is not concerned to posit, nor, like the antitheists, to depose, such a Being at all. In fact it would not naturally use the phrase 'a personal God'; for this in itself belongs to an understanding of theology and of what theological statements are about which is alien to it. For this way of thinking, to say that 'God is personal' is to say that 'reality at its very deepest level is personal', that personality is of ultimate significance in the constitution of the universe, that in personal relationships we touch the final meaning of existence as nowhere else. To predicate personality of God', says Feuerbach, 'is nothing else than to declare personality as the absolute essence'.2 To believe in God as love means to believe that in pure personal relationship we encounter, not merely what ought to be, but what is, the deepest, veriest truth about the structure of reality. This, in face of all the evidence, is a tremendous act of faith. But it is not the feat of persuading oneself of the existence of a super-Being beyond this world endowed with personal qualities. Belief in God is the trust, the well-nigh incredible trust, that to give ourselves to the uttermost in love is not to be confounded but to be 'accepted', that Love is the ground of our being, to which ultimately we 'come home'.

If this is true, then theological statements are not a description of 'the highest Being' but an analysis of the depths of personal relationships—or, rather, an analysis of the depths of all experience interpreted by love. Theology, as Tillich insists, is about 'that which concerns us ultimately'.3 A statement is 'theological' not because it relates to a particular Being called 'God', but because it asks ultimate questions about the meaning of existence: it asks what, at the level of theos, at the level of its deepest mystery, is the reality and significance of our life. A view of the world which affirms this reality and significance in personal categories is ipso facto making an affirmation about the ultimacy of personal relationships: it is saying that God, the final truth and reality 'deep down things', is love. And the specifically Christian view of the world is asserting that the

2 The Essence of Christianity (Eng. tr. 1854, from the second ed. of 1843), p. 97.
3 Systematic Theology, vol. i, p. 15.
final definition of this reality, from which ‘nothing cannot separate us’, since it is the very ground of our being, is ‘the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord’.¹

**Man and God**

If statements about God are statements about the ‘ultimacy’ of personal relationships, then we must agree that in a real sense Feuerbach was right in wanting to translate ‘theology’ into ‘anthropology’. He was concerned to restore the divine attributes from heaven to earth, whence, he believed, they had been filched and projected on to a perfect Being, an imaginary Subject before whom impoverished man falls in worship. Feuerbach believed that true religion consists in acknowledging the divinity of the attributes, not in transferring them to an illegitimate subject (dubbed by his Marxist disciple Bakunin ‘the mirage of God’). ‘The true atheist’, he wrote, ‘is not the man who denies God, the subject; it is the man for whom the attributes of divinity, such as love, wisdom and justice, are nothing. And denial of the subject is by no means necessarily denial of the attributes’.² This is, of course, very near to the position we have been taking; and Bultmann, in answer to a challenge from Karl Barth, says, ‘I would heartily agree: I am trying to substitute anthropology for theology, for I am interpreting theological affirmations as assertions about human life’.³

Yet it is also clear that we are here on very dangerous ground. For, to Feuerbach, to say that ‘theology is nothing else than anthropology’ means that ‘the knowledge of God is nothing else than a knowledge of man’.⁴ And his system runs out into the deification of man, taken to its logical conclusion in the Superman of Nietzsche and Auguste Comte’s Religion of Humanity.

The same ambiguity is to be found in the deeply Christian humanism of Professor John Macmurray, whose thought follows similar lines. At the beginning of his Gifford Lectures he says, ‘The conception of a deity is the conception of a personal ground of all that we experience’,¹ and he concludes them with a chapter, ‘The Personal Universe’,² which argues a position close to that for which we have been contending. But both in these lectures and even more in his earlier book, *The Structure of Religious Experience*, he makes statements which leave one wondering whether there is anything distinctive about religion at all. For instance, ‘Religion is about fellowship and community’,³ and, ‘The task of religion is the maintenance and extension of human community’.⁴ The question inevitably arises, if theology is translated into anthropology, why do we any longer need the category of God? Is it not ‘semantically superfluous’? Is not the result of destroying ‘supranaturalism’ simply to end up with naturalism, as the atheists asserted?

The dilemma can be stated in another passage of Macmurray. The question of God is the question of transcendence. It is precisely this that the location of God ‘up there’ or ‘out there’ was to express and safeguard and which its denial appears to imperil. But for Macmurray transcendence is a category that applies equally to humanity:

*We are both transcendent of experience and immanent in it. This union of transcendence and immanence is... the full fact about human personality... We are accustomed to find it*

1 *The Self as Agent* (1957), p. 17.
2 *Persons in Relation* (1961), Ch. X.
applied in theology to God, and it is usually assumed to be a peculiar and distinguishing attribute of Deity. We see now that this is a mistake. The union of immanence and transcendence is a peculiar and defining characteristic of all personality, human or divine; but it is primarily a natural, empirical fact of common human experience. Religious reflection applies it to God as a defining characteristic of universal personality because it finds it in experience as a given fact of all finite personal experience.¹

Macmurray here denies that transcendence is distinctively an attribute of God: he asserts it as a feature of all our experience. I believe that he is wrong in what he denies, but right in what he asserts. Contrary to what he says, our experience of God is distinctively and characteristically an awareness of the transcendent, the numinous, the unconditional. Yet that is a feature of all our experience—in depth. Statements about God are acknowledgements of the transcendent, unconditional element in all our relationships, and supremely in our relationships with other persons. Theological statements are indeed affirmations about human existence—but they are affirmations about the ultimate ground and depth of that existence. It is not enough to say that 'religion is about human fellowship and community', any more than one can simply reverse the Biblical statement and say that 'love is God'. And that, significantly, is what Feuerbach thought St John should have said.² But it is what the Apostle rather carefully refuses to do. He is clear that apart from the relationship of love there is no knowledge of God: 'He who does not love does not know God; for God is love.'³ And conversely: 'He who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.'⁴ But the premise of this

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² Op. cit., p. 261; cf. p. 47: 'Love is God himself, and apart from it there is no God.'
³ I John 4.8.
⁴ I John 4.16.
naturalism, whether pantheistic or humanistic. And, Tillich insists, it is necessary to push 'beyond naturalism and supranaturalism'. The naturalist critique of supranaturalism is valid. It has torn down an idol and Christianity must not be found clinging to it. But equally Christianity must challenge the assumption of naturalism that God is merely a redundant name for nature or for humanity. John Wren-Lewis observes that the naturalist critique of supranaturalism itself points to depths, divine depths, in experience for which it fails to account. He claims that Freud's own analysis of religion indicates as much:

For it is an integral part of his argument that fantasies about spiritual forces in the occult world are really 'projections' or 'displacements' of elements in our experience of personal relationships which we seek to avoid recognizing, but it is hard to see why the common projections made by the human race should have a numinous, transcendental character unless there is something numinous and transcendental in the experience of personal relationships themselves. The necessity for the name 'God' lies in the fact that our being has depth: which naturalism, whether evolutionary, mechanistic, dialectical or humanistic, cannot or will not recognize. And the nemesis which has overtaken naturalism in our day has revealed the peril of trying to suppress them. As Tillich puts it,

Our period has decided for a secular world. That was a great and much-needed decision. . . . It gave consecration and

1 Systematic Theology, vol. ii, p. 5.  
2 The Decline of Magic in Art and Politics, The Critical Quarterly, Spring 1960, p. 18. I should add that there is much in Wren-Lewis's writings (for instance, in his subsequent elaboration of this last sentence or in his article 'Modern Philosophy and the Doctrine of the Trinity' in The Philosophical Quarterly, vol. v (1955), pp. 214-24, which makes me doubt whether in the last analysis he himself is not expounding the thesis 'love is God'. At any rate he certainly does not guard himself adequately against this interpretation.

holiness to our daily life and work. Yet it excluded those deep things for which religion stands: the feeling for the inexhaustible mystery of life, the grip of an ultimate meaning of existence, and the invisible power of an unconditional devotion. These things cannot be excluded. If we try to expel them in their divine images, they re-emerge in daemonic images. Now, in the old age of our secular world, we have seen the most horrible manifestations of these daemonic images; we have looked more deeply into the mystery of evil than most generations before us; we have seen the unconditional devotion of millions to a satanic image; we feel our period's sickness unto death. 1

There are depths of revelation, intimations of eternity, judgements of the holy and the sacred, awarenesses of the unconditional, the numinous and the ecstatic, which cannot be explained in purely naturalistic categories without being reduced to something else. There is the 'Thus saith the Lord' heard by prophet, apostle and martyr for which naturalism cannot account. But neither can it discount it merely by pointing to the fact that 'the Lord' is portrayed in the Bible in highly mythological terms, as one who 'inhabits eternity' or 'walks in the garden in the cool of the evening'. The question of God is the question whether this depth of being is a reality or an illusion, not whether a Being exists beyond the bright blue sky, or anywhere else. Belief in God is a matter of 'what you take seriously without any reservation', of what for you is ultimate reality.

The man who acknowledges the transcendence of God is the man who in the conditioned relationships of life recognizes the unconditional and responds to it in unconditional personal relationship. In Tillich's words again,

To call God transcendent in this sense does not mean that one must establish a 'superworld' of divine objects. It does mean

1 The Shaking of the Foundations, p. 181.