

Centrality of Ontology and Reason in Tillich's Concept of Religion

Dr. T. Jamedi Longkumer

Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Dimapur Government College, Dimapur, Nagaland (India)

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Corresponding Author

Email: [jamelkr\[at\]rediffmail.com](mailto:jamelkr[at]rediffmail.com)

ABSTRACT

This paper is a modest attempt to study the significance of ontology and reason in Paul Tillich's (1886-1965) interpretation of man's religiosity. Tillich understood religion in terms of man's 'ultimate concern', a concept which has both objective and subjective meanings. In its objective sense it means God and subjectively understood it refers to the attitude of faith. This dual sense in Tillich's philosophy of religion can be properly deciphered only when it is examined from the perspective of ontology and rationality. To this end, effort has been made to first of all trace the root of the problem as envisaged in Tillich's own writing. Secondly, Tillich's assertion of transcending the subject-object dichotomy in the experience of God or Being-itself is studied in the context of Christianity and mysticism in general. Thirdly, through the study of Tillich's ontology, a discussion regarding the relation between Being-itself and the being (of man) is presented. Fourthly, based on the structure of being as envisaged by Tillich, a critical evaluation is done on Tillich's contention that his concept of ultimate concern, that is faith, is the fulfillment of human reason. Finally, an argument is forwarded supporting the conclusion that Tillich's ultimate concern, understood as the object and the attitude of concern, transcends both supernaturalism and naturalism.

1. Introduction

Tillich explains the reality of religion in terms of man's concern which is ultimate in nature. He uses the idea of ultimate concern in two different senses, namely as God, the object of concern and as faith, the subject's concern. The difficulty lies in determining which one of the two should come first in the relation of being ultimately concerned. If God is primary, then God would be the ultimate concern only to the extent that he is Being as such, for nothing else can be the ultimate. But the Being as such must have some kind of an inclusive relation with the being of man. And if man or rather his subjectivity, comes first then faith can run the risk of creating its own God. This has certain serious implications. If the focus is the removal of the dichotomy of the subject and object, then the ultimate concern may suggest an identity, of the humanity with the divinity. But, if the focus is the attitude itself, then, the separation of the two orders of reality, namely of creator and creature, manifestly fundamental to the Christian philosophy, can be equally argued for. In either case there are difficulties that a philosopher encounters. In the first case, Tillich will have to spell out clearly the nature of the identity affected. What does it mean to state that man is ontologically grounded in his ultimate concern? In the second case, possibly, the attitude to the ultimate concern can be maintained only in a spirit of Christian duality, irrespective of God being a reality or not. Faith then becomes an autonomous function of the human mind with or without an objective content in that attitude. The first focus may militate against the spirit of Christian theism. The second focus may do away with God altogether in the final analysis. For faith can be made into an autonomous concern, undefined by an objective content. We can either define God in terms of faith, that is, whatever concern conceived as the ultimate. Or conversely, we can define faith in terms of God, that is, concern about the ultimate that is God. Thus the dual senses of the ultimate concern can

take us in the direction of either naturalism or supernaturalism, lying in two opposite directions on the same line segment. How does Tillich deal with these two diametrically opposite tendencies in his philosophy? The solution to the problem proposed in this paper consists in having a fresh look at Tillich's ultimate concern from the perspective of ontology and rationality.

2. Methodology

The method followed in this study is both descriptive and analytic. It is descriptive with an eye to fidelity to what Tillich himself has got to say. Hence, there is judiciously reference from the works of Tillich, focusing on the more well-known works from his voluminous literary output. They serve as the primary source. The method is also analytic in its exposition of concepts with the objective of deriving meaning within the context of philosophical issues that have unfolded themselves in the history of western philosophy of religion.

3. The Problem

In his *Dynamics of Faith*, Tillich asserts, "The ultimate of the act of faith and the ultimate that is meant in the act of faith are one and the same ... this means the disappearance of the ordinary subject-object scheme in the experience of the ultimate, the unconditional." (Tillich, 1957, p.11) The statement seemingly raises the question about the relation between man and God. Is Tillich here suggesting that ultimately the two are ontologically one? This is the first problem. The second problem is found in his *Systematic Theology*, where he says, "God' is the answer to the question implied in man's finitude, he is the name for that which concerns man ultimately. This does not mean that first there is a being called God and then the demand that man should be ultimately concerned about him. It means that whatever concerns a man ultimately

becomes God for him, and, conversely, it means that a man can be concerned ultimately only about that which is God for him." (Tillich, 1968, p.234) In this passage Tillich seems to be pointing towards the possibility of so extreme a sundering of God and man that faith can operate as an autonomous function of the mind, whether God be a reality or not. This is the second problem. Thus Tillich, on the one hand, asserts that in the act of faith there is some sort of a union between man and God. But, on the other, he appears to be saying that faith and God are so completely separated from each other that the relation can be understood either in terms of supernaturalism or naturalism (Hick, 2000). What are we to make of these two problems? The first problem, I believe, will be cleared, if we understand the ontology of being as envisaged by Tillich. There are ontological presuppositions to the dynamics of ultimate concern. The predicament of being-in-the-world and man's relation with God, the ground of being, will have to be expressed in terms of both separation and participation. This is the presupposition of faith. One is ultimately concerned only about something to which one essentially belongs and, yet, from which one is existentially separated. On the basis of this ontological scheme, the second problem of the tension between supernaturalism and naturalism, too, perhaps, can be cleared. Tillich believes that his idea of ultimacy, which he calls self-transcendent or *ecstatic*, goes beyond the conflict between the two. Tillich goes beyond faith *per se* to its source in ontology. Thus faith is no longer just an attitude directed towards an object which is external to man, but is something which is essentially and virtually part of our being (Tillich, 1965).

4. Subject-Object Dichotomy: Christianity and Mysticism

In the state of being ultimately concerned, the being of man is said to be included *in*, or 'embraced' by the infinite vastness of God. The being of man in the encounter of faith disappears, as it were, in the being-itself of God. It is interesting to note that this touch of mysticism in Tillich is rooted in the doctrine of Being-itself which was originally used by the Scholastics. The doctrine is based on an immediate experience of something ultimate, in being and value, of which one is said to become intuitively aware. The mystic element in it is dependent on an identity between the experiencing subject and the ultimate, the experienced object, of religious experience. The awareness of a mystical *a priori* is also the awareness of something that transcends the cleavage between the subject and the object. And, if in the further course of enquiry, this *a priori* is discussed, it is only because it was present from the very beginning. The conception of a mystical *a priori* transcending the cleavage between the subject and object, which Tillich explicates, has certain similarities to the ways of traditional mysticism. The identity of the subject with the ultimate, the ontological ground of everything, and with the one, ineffable religious reality, is a common feature of all mysticism. The mystic believes that there is a 'place' where the ultimate is present within the finite, namely, in 'the depth' of the human soul. This depth is the point of contact between the finite and the infinite. In order to reach it man must empty himself of all finite contents that concern preliminarily his ordinary life. He must transcend the division of existence itself which is the deepest and the most universal of all division between the subject and the object. For the ultimate is beyond

all division. Mysticism does precisely this overcoming of the cleavage by merging the mind with the content of its unconditional concern. In this merger is effected the coalescing of the ground of being and meaning of human life. It considers the world of space, time and causation as ultimately unreal in reference to the one ultimate reality.

Mysticism however is not without its philosophical problems. One such problem with mysticism is that, by denying the significance of ordinary life, it dissolves the very question of its meaning. Its belief in the union with the divine by means of ecstatic contemplation ignores the concrete aspects of life. Tillich was aware of this inherent difficulty involved in mysticism. The statement of identity in mysticism necessarily presupposes an element of non-identity. This latter element is however seldom explained by the mystics themselves. For Tillich, mysticism is unable to answer the question of meaninglessness and finitude in which man lives (Tillich, 1952). This criticism serves as a kind of an indicator to shed light on the nature of the ontological relation between finite and infinite, between man and God that Tillich attempts in his thought.

5. Ontology And The Ultimate Concern

1. Levels of Ontological Analysis

According to Tillich, the being of man and the meaning of his life are inextricably linked with the Being-itself of the ultimate concern (Tillich, 1968). God is said to be the answer to the 'question' implied in being, and, again, in man's being. The finite being of man itself is the question that demands an answer. The source of the question then is both being and the being of man. This question is not something which is thrust upon man from *outside*, therefore, something foreign. It is rather what wells up as a demand from *within*. The question is one of his finitude which pushes man to the very root of his existence. The question, as to why there is something and not nothing, is fundamental. This question underlies all being. It is not an objective enquiry, nor is it purely subjective, it must be asked on the level that underlies the split between objectivity and subjectivity. It is the ultimate question, although, fundamentally, it is the expression of a state of existence, rather than a linguistically formulated question. Tillich believes that whenever this state is experienced, this question is asked, and, then, everything existent suggests itself of falling in the abyss of possible non-being (Tillich, 1955). The question of being and meaning arises out of the structure of being which constitutes everything that is something. In other words, if one looks at things as they are given, one at once discovers the principles, the structure and the nature of being embodied in everything that is. Such concepts Tillich holds to be strictly *a priori*. They are present wherever something is experienced, and they determine the nature of experience itself. This however does not mean that they can be *known* prior to experience. They are known rather through the critical analysis of actual instances of experiences. Tillich distinguishes the following four levels of ontological analysis:

1.1 Subject - Object Correlation

The ontological question, "What is being?" presupposes an asking 'subject' and an 'object' about which the question is asked. This, in turn, presupposes the self-world structure as

the basic articulation of being, that is, *being* as 'man-encountering-the-world'. This logically and experientially precedes all other structures. From this polar relationship between man and the world, man's basic ontological structure is derived. This analysis of 'the basic ontological structure' assumes, without questioning, that the epistemological 'subject-object distinction' is absolutely ultimate, not only for all knowing, but for all being. It is not only 'prior to us', but also 'prior in nature' (Tillich, 1968).

1.2 Ontological Elements

The second level of ontological analysis deals with those 'ontological elements', which constitute the basic structure of being. These elements are polar, in as much as each is meaningful only in relation to its opposite pole. There are three outstanding pairs: individuality and participation, dynamics and forms, and freedom and destiny. Individualization is a quality of everything. It is implied in and constitutive of every self. The individual self participates in his environment. The union of the individual person and the communion of the participated universal are the expressions of the same polarity. Secondly, being something means having a form. Every form forms something as opposed to nothing. This something is termed by Tillich as 'dynamics' (Tillich, 1968). It is the potentiality of being, which is, in a sense, the non-being in contrast to things that have a form, and the power of being in contrast to pure non-being. Freedom and destiny form the third ontological polarity. Man experiences the structure of the individual as the bearer of freedom within the larger structure to which the individual structure belongs. Destiny point to this larger structure in which man finds himself facing the world to which at the same time he belongs inextricably (Tillich, 1968).

1.3 Conditions of Existence

The third level of ontological analysis expresses the power of being to exist, the nature of 'existential being', and its difference from 'essential being'. Existence and essence too are in a relation of polarity. Tillich firmly believes that there is no ontology which can disregard these two aspects; whether they are hypostatized into two realms (Plato) or combined in the polar relation of potentiality and actuality (Aristotle); whether contrasted with each other (Kierkegaard, Heidegger), or derived from each other, either existence from essence (Spinoza, Hegel), or essence from existence (Dewey, Sartre). Finite freedom is the turning point from essence, or being, to existence. Finitude is hence at the centre of Tillich's analysis, for it is the finitude of existent being which drives man to the question of God. Experienced on the human level, finitude is the non-being, as the threat to being, ultimately the threat of death (Tillich, 1968).

1.4 Categories of being and knowing

The fourth level of ontological analysis consists of the categories of being and knowing. They are 'the forms in which the mind grasps and shapes reality' (Tillich, 1968, p.213). But, unlike in the Kantian scheme, they are not mere logical forms, only indirectly related to reality itself. They are also ontological, present in everything. They are forms of finitude. For his purpose Tillich emphasizes on four main categories: time, space, causality and substance. The categories reveal their ontological character through their double relation to being and

non-being. They express being, but, at the same time, they express the non-being to which everything, that is, is subject. Being the forms of finitude, the categories as such unite an affirmative and a negative element. The ontological task, which prepares the way for the question of God, is an analysis of this duality.

2. Ultimate Concern: the Answer

2.1 Man's Position in Ontology

Man is that being which asks what being is. This is the question of ultimate concern for man. It is the question about what *is* and, at the same time, what it is *for us*. Thus it is both theoretical and existential in character. The structure of being, as manifest in the self-world correlation, the elements, the condition of existence, the categories, has the character of finitude. The structure implies finitude, it raises the problem of finitude. All categories of thought and reality, according to Tillich, express this situation. But man, according to Tillich is different, because this situation is actual in him (Tillich, 1968).

2.2 Man's Finitude and God's Infinitude

Essentially it is the awareness of the finitude of his being which drives man to the question of God. And this question of God is the question of the possibility of the courage to accept the anxiety of non-being inherent in his nature. Tillich rejects as invalid all the traditional 'arguments' for the existence of God as neither arguments nor proofs. They are rather expressions or articulations of the *question* of God, which is implied in human finitude. God is not a being, he is Being-itself or the ground of being. Being-itself infinitely transcends every finite being. There is no proportion or gradation between the finite and the infinite. Rather there is an absolute break, an abyssal 'jump'. Everything participates in being-itself and in its infinity. Otherwise it would not have the power of being. God is the ground of the ontological structure of being without being subject to this structure himself.

2.3 God beyond Subject-Object Correlation

The ultimate concern, namely, God, transcends every preliminary, finite and concrete concern. Indeed, it must transcend the whole realm of finitude to be the answer to the question implied in finitude. The truly ultimate, the Being-itself is beyond the subject-object cleavage. It is important to realize, that, from Tillich's standpoint, God is at once subject and object. Yet, strictly speaking, God is not an object of knowledge for man. To be sure, Tillich admits that, when we talk of Being-itself we make of it into an object of thought. Yet, he distinguishes the study of the order of being (ontology) from that of the order of knowing (epistemology) (Tillich, 1968).

2.4 God in terms of Causality and Substance

Fully aware of the many philosophical difficulties relating to the traditional usage of the concepts of causality and substance, he employs them as symbolic expressions, and not as categories of reality. Causality generally makes the world dependent on God, and, at the same time, separates God from the world in the way a cause is separated from the effect. But the category of causality is inherently defective, for cause and effect are not metaphysically separated from each other, they include each other, and form a union which is endless in both directions. What this means is that the category is, as a matter

of fact, denied, while it is being used. Tillich therefore claims that, while causality can be used to express the relation between man and his ground, it has to be used strictly as a symbol, and not as a category representing reality. Similarly, the category of substance should be used not as a category but as a symbol. Thus, taken symbolically, both *primum causa* and *ultima substantia* mean what Tillich calls in a symbolic way as the creative and abysmal ground of being (Tillich, 1968).

6. Ultimate Concern As Ecstatic Reason

Tillich supplements his ontological explanation of man's ultimate concern by a psychological explanation of it. The latter is also a rational analysis of the dynamics of faith, hence, it is given in terms of 'reason'. However, it must be noted that he does not understand reason as we tend to do today, that is, in the sense of scientific method, logical strictness and technical calculation, under the impact of the positivistic philosophies. Such an understanding of reason, because it confines and restricts itself to the technical aspect of life, is narrow and, hence, is rejected by Tillich as 'technical reason', distinct from ontological reason. He rather explains reason in terms of the meaning and structure of mind and reality. He calls it ontological reason, which makes possible our specific mode of being. He distinguishes two aspects of this reason, subjective and objective reason. The former is the structure of the mind, which enables it to grasp and shape reality. The latter is the corresponding structure of reality. The former does its function in accordance with the latter. Thus reason, as the structure of mind and reality, is actual in the process of being, existence and life. But being is finite, existence is self-contradictory and life is ambiguous (Tillich, 1968). Therefore, actual reason participates in their characteristics of reality. Man's reason is finite, it moves within finite relation when dealing with the universe and with man himself. All cultural activities, in which man perceives his world and those in which he shapes his world, have this character of finitude. Therefore, they cannot be matters of infinite concern. But, then, reason is unique in the sense that it is aware of its own finitude and limitation, thereby transcending itself (Tillich, 1957). The self-transcendence of reason at once suggests that it has its origin, not in man, but elsewhere. Tillich believes that this ability of reason to recognize its own finitude points to something beyond itself, the depth of reason. This depth of finite reason was described in classical forms by Nicholas Cusanus in his *docta ignorantia*. It accepts and acknowledges the finitude of man's cognitive reason and its inability to grasp its infinite ground. But the knowledge, that it is impossible to express the infinite depth of reason, is real knowledge. In other words, actual or technical reason is able to see that it cannot deal with the depth, or being-itself in terms of the subject-object relation to which all finite relations are structured. On this basis Tillich goes on to claim that reason is able to transcend itself. Its self-transcendence is also its 'ecstasy', literally 'to stand outside of itself' (Tillich, 1957). It is this ecstatic quality of reason which makes faith, or ultimate concern, a human potentiality (Tillich, 1968).

To Tillich, if reason is grasped by an ultimate concern, it is driven beyond itself. Reason then becomes faith. The contrast between faith and knowledge, revelation and reason, religion and science, traditionally entertained, collapses, for Tillich.

They are all the expressions, or outcome, of the same reason (Tillich, 1957). Ecstasy is not a negation of reason but the state of the mind in which reason goes beyond itself transcending its basic subject-object structure. The infinite cannot be a part of the dynamics of subject-object relation, because this relation is invariably limited and specific. One cannot, in any way, directly describe or imagine the truly ultimate, because it transcends the subject-object relation. All human language is ordered to the routine experience of an individual subject, who contemplates objects or beings that exist independently of himself. The inability to express this experience, however, does not deny the truth of the ecstatic experience of the ultimate concern. Tillich is never tired of reminding that faith is reason fulfilled in ecstasy in union with its depth. It is the mind's state of being ultimately concerned. Tillich therefore asserts that man is existentially separated from the depth of his being, but, in a mystical way, in the act of faith, this gap however is overcome.

7. Beyond Naturalism and Supernaturalism

The above discussion is an ontological analysis of man's relation with the ground of his being, which makes faith a distinct human possibility. It is precisely on the basis of such a relationship that Tillich rejects both naturalistic as well as a supernaturalistic interpretation of the concept of ultimate concern. The answer to the concern can neither be developed out of human existence itself nor is it 'the sum of revealed truths which have fallen into the human situation like strange bodies from a strange world'. That is to say, the relation between God and human faith can neither be understood exclusively in terms of identity nor only in terms of separation. Rather it has to be understood in terms of going beyond both. Tillich talks of faith as 'the state of being ultimately concerned' about something. In the same breath, Tillich holds that 'God' is the name for that which concerns man ultimately. Therefore, God is the answer to the question implied in man's finitude. Tillich's ideas here have around them a ring of an argument. To be sure, ontologically speaking, this argument is clear enough. But, from a religious perspective, it presents a certain problem. The phrase, 'being ultimately concerned', as Tillich uses it, points to a tension in human experience (Tillich, 1968). On the one hand, it is impossible to be concerned about something which cannot be encountered concretely, be it in the realm of reality or in the realm of imagination. Even universals can become matters of 'ultimate concern' only through their power of representing concrete experience. On the other hand, the ultimate concern must be such that it transcends every preliminary, finite and concrete concern. It must transcend the whole realm of finitude, if it has to be the answer to the question implied in finitude. This is the inescapable inner tension in the idea of God as the object of man's ultimate concern (Tillich, 1968).

Tillich believes that this tension in the nature of God as the ultimate concern reflects the tension in the structure of man's ultimate concern. As the history of philosophy of religion testifies, this conflict, or tension, had found its expression in religious philosophies in the form of naturalism or supernaturalism. Emphasis on the concreteness of the concern leads to the former, and emphasis on the ultimacy, to the latter. Supernaturalism separates God as a being, the highest being,

from all other beings, alongside and above which he has his existence. Such a being, it is believed, has brought the universe into being at a certain moment, governs it wisely according to a plan, directs it towards an end, interferes, if need be, with its ordinary processes in order to overcome resistance and to fulfill his purpose, and finally will bring it to a consummation in a final catastrophe. Within this framework supernaturalism understands the whole divine human drama. This is generally the case of any theism, especially of Christianity. Tillich notes that supernaturalism in this way transforms the infinity of God into a finiteness, which is merely an extension of the categories of finitude. This is done, in respect to space, by establishing a supernatural divine world alongside the natural human world; in respect to time, by determining a beginning and an end to God's creativity; in respect to causality, by making God a cause alongside other causes; and, in respect to substance, by attributing individual substance to him. On the other hand, naturalism, especially in the western context, identifies God with the universe, with its essence or with the special power within it. He may not be identified with the totality of things, but he is the symbol of the unity, harmony and power of beings. God is not identical with 'nature', but he is certainly identical with *natura naturans*, the creative ground of all natural objects. But the problem Tillich sees in naturalism is that it denies the infinite 'distance' between the whole of finite things and its infinite ground. The consequence of the denial is that the term 'God' now becomes interchangeable with the term 'universe', and therefore is semantically superfluous. Tillich evaluates both the perspectives of supernaturalism and naturalism as insufficient.

The answer to the problem, which Tillich provides and which, he believes, overcomes the alternative between naturalism and supernaturalism, is the idea of 'self-transcendent' idea of God and the world; so, too, the 'ecstatic' idea of the human mind. Tillich agrees with naturalism in asserting that God would not be God if he were not the creative ground of everything that has being; and that, in fact, he is the infinite and unconditional power of being, and that he is being-itself. In this respect God is neither alongside things nor even above them. He is their creative ground, here and now, always and everywhere. But Tillich goes beyond naturalism by bringing in what he calls the 'self-transcendent' element in the idea of God (Tillich, 1968). However, this

transcendence of God is not to be understood in terms of the spatial and temporal separation from the world, but in terms of self-transcendence of the world. The finitude of the world which is experienced in different dimensions only points to the infinity as the ground of the finite. The phrase 'ecstatic idea of God' points to the experience of the holy as transcending ordinary experience without removing it. Tillich's use of the two terms, of 'ecstatic' in relation with the mind and of 'self-transcendence' in relation with reality for the sake of explaining the relation between God and world (and consequently between the ultimate of the act of faith and the ultimate act of faith), is very subtle. He is trying to walk extremely slippery path, balancing himself to avoid both the fallacy of naturalism and supernaturalism at the same time.

8. Conclusion

On the basis of the discussion on the ultimate concern, reflected in ontology and human reason, a solution to the problem stated at the beginning may be sought. It has been stated that the dual senses of ultimate concern can take us in the direction of either supernaturalism or naturalism, and that they are opposed to each other. This is so, because Tillich's ultimate concern allows us to define faith in terms of God as the concern for the ultimate that is God; and also to define God in terms of faith as whatever concern conceived as the ultimate. This, in turn, was so, because we presupposed the autonomy of faith as an attitude of man, and God as an object, to which man directs his subjectivity. But a careful study of Tillich has shown that God, as conceived by Tillich, is not an object for man who is a subject, but rather the ground of all beings, including man. Likewise, faith is not a conscious attitude adopted by man towards what he subjectively considers to be the ultimate, but rather the state of being aware of his relationship with the ground of his being. Faith is therefore rooted in the structure of being, and, hence, is given to man. It means that faith is potentially present in all beings. But in man it can be actually present. Thus the dual senses of ultimate concern, faith and God, are not to be taken in the sense of subject-object dichotomy, but as an expression of the true relationship between the finite being and the infinite ground of being, understood in terms of both participation and separation.

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