

PAUL TILlich AND ST THOMAS

KENELM FOSTER, O.P.

THE theological writings of Professor Tillich deserve the attention of students of St Thomas, both for their positive content, which is of the highest interest, and because on fundamental matters they explicitly and sharply join issue with Thomism. They invite the presumption of a certain common ground, certain affinities, and at the same time throw out a challenge which we cannot ignore.

To read these works, especially the great *Systematic Theology* (1951), is to encounter a powerful and original personality, a mind organized to an uncommon degree around a single centre. Tillich's peculiar gift is for synthesis; a constructive thinker with a very wide range of interests, he is always striving to correlate and organize these on the basis of a singularly vivid intuition of being in general, the primary *datum* of the mind, which for him—as for St Thomas—represents the mind's first opening onto reality as a whole, as both containing and transcending human nature. It is this consciously ontological character of Tillich's thinking that seems to distinguish him among contemporary Protestant theologians; as J. H. Randall observes, he 'stands in the classic tradition of Western philosophy', in the tradition, derived from the Greeks, of speculative concern with being itself and wisdom.¹ Let us stress this 'concern'. 'Ultimate concern' is Tillich's definition of religion, and by 'ultimate' he means 'that which determines our being or non-being'.² Man for him is the being who 'asks the question of being', and since God is 'the answer implied in the question of being',³ theology is essentially a searching into the same question. Hence Tillich's emphatic refusal (against the 'biblicist' tendencies of a more or less Barthian type) to separate theology from philosophy. For him the difference between the two disciplines consists in this, that while both aim at understanding 'the structure of being', the philosopher regards this with 'detached objectivity' whereas the theologian is existentially committed to it as to the manifestation of his Lord and God.⁴ So the true theologian is also a philosopher, for he too asks the ontological question—that 'simplest, most profound, and

¹ *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, edited by C. W. Kegley and R. W. Bretall, New York 1952, p. 132.

² *Systematic Theology*, p. 24, cf. p. 14.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-32.

absolutely inexhaustible question . . . of what it means to say that something *is*⁵—though from within a concrete commitment to the Christian message.

Yet despite this philosophical *eros*, this notable drive of his mind towards being, Tillich is a declared and downright anti-Thomist. In this essay I shall state the objection he usually brings against Thomism, and then attempt, briefly, to indicate the ground of this difference in the different ways that he and we reflect on the primary *datum*, being.

Explicitly the clash with St Thomas occurs over the question of proving the existence of God. With a frequency that betrays a keen personal concern in the matter Tillich reiterates his opposition to any attempt to demonstrate God's existence. 'The arguments for the existence of God', runs a characteristic passage, 'neither are arguments nor are they proof of the existence of God. They are expressions of the *question* of God which is implied in human finitude. This question is their truth; every answer they give is untrue.'⁶ Primarily, it seems, it is not the arguments themselves, as arguments, that Tillich objects to, but the attitude of mind that proposes them. This comes out clearly in another typically strong statement: 'It is as atheistic to affirm the existence of God as to deny it. God is being-itself, not a being.'⁷ The rejection, then, of the proofs for God's existence is evidently part and parcel of a rejection of a certain way—typified, for Tillich, by St Thomas particularly—of thinking about God at all. Though God supremely *is*, he must not be thought of as *existing*, because this would be to treat him as one thing along with others, whether one affirmed his existence or merely put the question. The question should be 'neither asked nor answered'.⁸ This is not to say that there is no 'question of God'; there is, and it is the theologian's *raison-d'être*—but only if and in so far as it is not contaminated by the question about existence, the question *an sit*.

What then is the authentic, the right, the uncontaminated 'question of God'? It is, first, the ontological question of 'what it means to *be*'. To this question God is the implicit answer, but explicitly its answer is an understanding of the 'structure of being' through certain ultimate principles and categories—in short, an ontology (this term Tillich prefers to 'metaphysics'). Now the structure of being contains an 'unconditional element' which is disclosed to the attentive mind in terms of certain absolute norms: '*verum ipsum*, the true-itself', in the theoretical reason, '*bonum ipsum*, the good-itself',

⁵ *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality*, 1955, p. 6.

⁶ *Systematic Theology*, p. 228.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

in the practical reason. Rightly to acknowledge these norms is to acknowledge, to become aware of, God; for they are 'manifestations of *esse-ipsium*, being-itself, the ground and abyss of everything that is'.⁹ They are the presence of God in our mind as the 'power of being'; so that with them arises, beyond the question of mere being, the explicit question of God as God. But what sort of question is this, what answer does it expect? If I understand Tillich rightly at this point—and he has not, I think, made himself perfectly clear—he would say, first, that the explicit emergence of the question of God is the expression, in 'the depth of reason', of a direct encounter of the finitude of man with the infinite godhead;¹⁰ and secondly, that the 'answer' therefore expected is a release from the peril, the 'anxiety', of finitude, it is a being given a share in God's eternal being;¹¹ and thirdly, that the answer that must *not* be expected, that must not even be envisaged, is any assurance of God's existence other than that already given in the awareness of the unconditional element in experience. But it is just here, Tillich insists, that Western theology, between Augustine and Aquinas, went astray. The classic formulation of the unconditional element, in terms of the norm of truth, *veritas*, was given to the West by Augustine, but later distorted into arguments for the existence of God, notably by the Augustinian St Anselm with his 'ontological argument', the value of which lies wholly and solely in the point from which it starts, 'the description of the relation of our mind to being as such', as apprehended in the transcendental notions, *esse, verum, bonum*.¹² The rest of it is utterly invalid—not only as a logical process, as St Thomas later and Kant saw, but also in what it attempted to prove, namely God's existence as a *fact*. And this, of course, rules out in advance St Thomas's quite different proof of the same conclusion.

Tillich, then, denies that one can properly say that God exists: 'The scholastics were right when they asserted that in God there is no difference between essence and existence. But they perverted their insight when they spoke of the existence of God and tried to argue in favour of it.'¹³ This might be thought a mere question of terms, of the way one chooses to use the word 'existence'. For Tillich, certainly, existence always connotes finitude; it is always for him the actualization of some potentiality: 'whatever exists', he writes, 'is more than it is in the state of mere potentiality and less

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 229-30, cf. p. 88; *Theology of Culture*, pp. 12-16.

¹⁰ Cf. *Systematic Theology*, p. 88.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 181-206, 224; cf. *Theology of Culture*, pp. 30-39.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 227-31; *Theology of Culture*, pp. 10-29.

¹³ *Systematic Theology*, p. 227.

than it could be in the power of its essential nature'.¹⁴ In this sense of the term, then, plainly God does not exist—for us no more than for Tillich. If this were all the difference between us it could be settled, in theory at least, quite easily. We could reserve 'existence' to signify finite actual being and find some other term for the infinite actuality. But the matter is not, it is clear, as simple as that. For one thing, Tillich explicitly and repeatedly rejects any and every argument for establishing the—let us say—'isness' of the infinite being; and for another thing—and here is the more radical disagreement—he appears to reject on principle the judgment *that God is* (as distinct from mere awareness *of* his reality) whether this judgment be made as the conclusion of an inference or simply as a statement of sheer fact.¹⁵ Let us take these two points in turn.

As to the first one, the possibility of arguing to the existence of God, it is not to my purpose here to defend the accepted arguments, or any others, but it is very relevant to understand why Tillich rejects them. He does so broadly for two reasons: because he thinks they are bad arguments and because he thinks that the being whose existence they conclude to falls short of the true, the adequate notion of God. But his main stress falls on this second point. Indeed, so far as I have read him, he offers only one direct, detailed criticism of the argumentative process in question as such. It occurs on pages 217-8 of *Systematic Theology* and deals with the possibility of finding God at the end of a causal series; but as criticism it is quite superficial and so it need not detain us. As I say, his main objection, and it springs from the heart of his system, is to the sort of God the arguments are supposed to conclude to. He insists again and again that 'to argue that God exists is to deny him'; it is to erect a no-God, an idol, in the place of God.¹⁶ And his three chief reasons for this assertion are, I think, the following: to argue for God's existence is in effect (a) to make God a mere 'object' *vis-à-vis* the human subject who reasons about him (whereas in reality he transcends the subject-object division);¹⁷ (b) it is to make God a mere 'existent' and therefore, as we have seen, one finite thing among others; and (c) it is to reduce God to a 'missing part' of the world from which the argument—in particular the so-called 'cosmological argument'

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 225-6, 183.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 227: 'God does not exist. He is being-itself beyond essence and existence'. This distinction of the true God from the false one of whom existence is predicated leads to the statement that 'Genuine religion without an element of atheism cannot be imagined'. *Theology of Culture*, p. 25.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

of St Thomas—pretends to derive him; which again is to make God finite.¹⁸

The point, then, is that a certain way of thinking about God is considered to un-God him. Now what, *au fond*, is this way of thinking? What use of the mind is it that Tillich radically objects to? It is, I suggest, that use of the mind which traditional logic calls *judgment*, and in particular the judgment of fact or existence—‘Peter *is*’, ‘this table *is*’. In traditional logic, judgment is, formally speaking, the second operation of the mind. The first is ‘simple apprehension’ whereby one forms a concept, or cluster of concepts, of e.g., the man Peter. Such concepts combine or separate in the mind according to the evidence given by experience or reasoning; and then, in view of this evidence, one *assents* to the combination or the separation: ‘Peter is a man’, ‘he is not clever’, ‘he exists’, ‘he does not exist’. Now it is important here to note two things about the function of the verb ‘to be’ in judgment, as we understand this. First, the verb ‘to be’ is present in every judgment, at least implicitly: to say ‘Peter writes’ is to mean ‘Peter is writing’. And secondly, the verb ‘to be’ has a double function in every judgment, what is called a formal function and a material one. When I say, ‘Peter is a man’, the copula ‘is’ expresses something about Peter’s being, that he has the sort of being we call human; and this is the material function of ‘is’ in the judgment. Its formal function, that which it exercises precisely as completing the act of judging, is to express my *assent* to the fact that Peter is human; it means ‘Yes, it is so’. Moreover, since judgment is, essentially, not mere awareness of some reality, but assent to this awareness, it is not mere knowledge but a knowing that one knows; hence that function of ‘is’ which is proper precisely to its presence in judgment is to express a *knowledge that one knows*. And since the mind formally as mind is the power to know, it follows that the mind’s conformity to the real, its truthfulness, *veritas*, is only found formally and fully in the judgment¹⁹—not in our simple awareness of reality but in the act through which we simultaneously both know and assent to our awareness, in the judgment ‘*x* is (or is not) *y*’—where ‘is’ expresses both the act of knowledge as such, i.e. the mind as mind’s conformity to the real, its immanent truthfulness, and also the objective being of that real to which the mind is now conformed; but the former formally, the latter only materially.

With this analysis behind us we are in a position to meet Tillich’s criticism of St Thomas; which is based, I think, on a misunderstanding of the function of the copula in judgment. St Thomas

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

¹⁹ Cf. *Summa Theol.*, 1a. xvi, 2.

makes it perfectly clear that the term 'being' has two main functions: to signify reality as such, and to signify the mind's conformity to reality. Thus very early, in the *De ente et essentia*, we read: 'The term being (*ens*) is used in two ways: in one way as referring to what is divided into the ten categories (i.e. being as real or existing); in another way as signifying the truth of propositions. And the difference is this, that in the second way anything can be called being about which one can form an affirmative proposition, even if nothing is thereby stated to exist *in re*; and in this sense we speak of privations and negations as 'beings', saying that affirmation *is* the opposite of negation, and that blindness *is* in the eye. But in terms of the first way we can only speak of being in referring to something that really exists (or could exist, one may add). And in this sense blindness and so forth are not "beings". The reference to non-entities like blindness may be confusing, but the point of this quotation for our purpose is simply to bring out the distinction between *ens* as real—i.e. existing or able to exist—and *ens* as expression of the mind's truthfulness. And both senses of *ens* are involved in every judgment, but the second is the one proper to and characteristic of judgment. And in general it is characteristic of the human reason's effort to know reality, if this effort finds its successful issue (in this world at least) only in the formulation of true judgments: 'this is so', 'this is not so'. Characteristic therefore of human rational knowing is a certain indirectness *vis-à-vis* reality-as-in-itself, inasmuch as reason knows most fully by a sort of spontaneous reflection on and assent to its apprehensions, by a sort of *reculer pour mieux sauter*, which expresses reality—through the judgment copula 'is'—not simply as reality is in itself but as it has come to be, conceptually, in the mind. From another point of view we should say that rational knowledge always connotes a certain initial abstraction.

And all this is true of the judgment of fact or existence also, in which the verb 'to be' is predicate as well as copula. 'The table *is*' means 'the table is in being, is an actual existent'. And here the copula 'is' expresses (a) the table's own existence, which is material of my judgment, and (b) my assent to it, which is form of the judgment. But prior (in nature, not in time) to my assent to it the table's existence must have somehow have entered my mind, being 'conceived' there in a concept, as we say. I am aware that here I touch on the delicate and difficult problem as to how in fact the concrete singular existence *can* be known through a concept, i.e. not without *some* intellectual abstraction—a problem which Thomists in particular must face, in view of their doctrine that nothing, not even existence, comes within the field of vision of human intelligence

except as a result of a certain abstraction from sense data. But this further problem must not detain us; all I wish and need to do here is to point out that the judgment of existence, being a judgment, also exhibits the double function of the copula explained above. Precisely as an assent it expresses with its 'is'— x is an existent—primarily the mind's possession of a truth about x —that it is—and not immediately x 's actuality of being as this is, so to say, in x . And this point is the more evident when x is not something immediately given in sense-experience or self-experience, but only mediately known about through inference. St Thomas held that this is the case with our *scientific*, i.e. rationally established, knowledge of God's existence. Some *infra-scientific* awareness is indeed allowed for by St Thomas at the 'intuitive' level of sense- or self-experience; but the critical reason, he thought, remains unsatisfied until it has found reason to predicate *esse* of that *divinum aliquid* which it already, but only obscurely, apprehends. And the predication is a judgment of existence. It is indeed a very extraordinary judgment of existence, inasmuch as in this case and this alone the predicate is the Absolute, subsistent Existence itself, compared with which all other things are as nothing. It is very mysterious indeed that God can be *judged* to exist by his creatures. But there are no short cuts past this mystery. To try to short-cut it from the ontological position of a Tillich only results in confusion—confusion about human knowledge and about the nature of God. And to conclude this inadequate criticism of a man whose greatness I most readily acknowledge, let me point, more explicitly, to the former of these confusions.

It is a confusion about the way we rationally know, and one passage in *Systematic Theology* is particularly revealing of Tillich's unawareness of the relevant distinction I have tried to state, between *ens in se* and *ens* as the mind's expression of truth. It runs as follows: 'In order to maintain the truth that God is beyond essence and existence while simultaneously arguing for the existence of God, Thomas Aquinas is forced to distinguish between two kinds of divine existence: that which is identical with essence and that which is not. But an existence of God . . . not united with its essence is a contradiction in terms.'²⁰ The revealing phrase is 'two kinds of divine existence'. There is, of course, for St Thomas only one kind: the *esse Deum* of the judgment 'that God exists' is formally and immediately only an expression of the mind's truth, of a truthful state of the human mind. But the answer to Tillich's charge was formulated long ago in the *Contra Gentiles*; it is all too brief but it goes, I think, to the root of the matter. St Thomas is replying to an objector who

²⁰ *Systematic Theology*, p. 262.

would say that if essence and existence are in God identical, and if by reason we cannot know God's essence, it follows that reason cannot demonstrate his existence. The saint's reply may be rendered thus: 'It is not a valid objection to point to the identity of essence and existence in God. For this is the existence whereby God subsists in himself, which is as unknown to us as his essence. It is not that existence (*esse*) which expresses an affirmative judgment in the mind. This latter existence, as in the judgment *that God is*, is patient of demonstration inasmuch as, by probative reasons, our mind can be led to form a proposition about God expressing that he is.'²¹

Confusion about human knowledge is likely to cause confusion in one's doctrine about God. But I cannot pursue the matter here. Enough to suggest that a certain withdrawal into, or remaining in, one's awareness of the divinity adumbrated in the intuition of being and of its 'unconditional elements'—a refusal to analyse, rationally, 'Godness' into a clear and distinct concept—that all this is bound to leave our idea of God imperfectly distinguished from our idea of whatever is not God. And this is certainly the case with Paul Tillich, as the final chapters of *Systematic Theology* clearly show. Perhaps, after all, what this great book offers us is not theology at all, but a magnificent essay in religious anthropology.

²¹ *Contra Gentiles* I, 12.

NOTICE

The next (October) issue of BLACKFRIARS will include 'Hinduism and Christianity' by Bede Griffiths, O.S.B., 'The Idea of Reform' by Yves Congar, O.P., and surveys of Ecumenical Theology and recent German opinion.