Paul Tillich's Pantheon of Theisms: An Invitation to Think Theonomously

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I

For Tillich, *Deus est esse ipsum*, God is being itself, and nothing else may be ontologically stated without being symbolic. Yet, for the religious practitioner, who—to use Tillich's language—*lives* in a world of religious symbols, what is to be said or believed about God? Tillich's system of thought does leave the Christian with the notion that God is the answer to the 'big questions' (Sabin 1944, 70). The problem is that *esse-ipsum* as the *prius* or *ultima substantia* of theonomous thinking is not what most Christians have in mind when they refer to *God* (Otto 1980, 306). To go even further, Martin Gardner (1994, 187) observed in his satirical novel *The Flight of Peter Fromm* that *esse-ipsum*, as an idea, was *designed* by Tillich to be "safe from all conceivable attack," a *safety* at the price of a Christianity "so thin and bloodless that no ordinary man, woman or child can find it interesting." This perceived safety is indicative of a "gerrymandering of language," as some critics have argued, so that *esse-ipsum* by default becomes, as Owen Thomas (1977, 159) charged, "unavoidable."

Langdon Gilkey (1990, 103) draws a distinction between the clause *Deus est esse ipsum* and "God is being-itself" in Tillich. The earlier clause, the Latin version of the second clause, is classified as an ontological statement which is unapproachable; and Tillich admits that "God is being-itself" is a *religious* statement, allowing being-itself (*esse-ipsum*) to be equated with the Christian symbolic language for God. Radical theologian Robert Scharlemann asks:

> If God is being-itself, is being-itself God? This thematic question concerning the "is" between "God" and "being-itself" is not explicitly discussed by Tillich. But the question is pertinent to Tillich's correlation of God and being. If we can say "God *is* being" but not

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> "Being is God," what can we say of being-itself in relation to God? Can we say, "Being *defines* God"? Is there a *deificare* in being-itself just as there is the *esse* in God? In other words, is *being* which identifies God as God, also the eternal activity of God? Is being that which God *does*? If it is, then the word *being* not only names what or who God is but also names the activity of God as God. This is to say, in other words, that what is *named* by the three words "God is Being" is one and the same referent. That would be the integration, if not the formulation, of statements such as "Deus est" and "Deus est esse ipsum." (Scharlemann 2004, 7–8)

The question of God's *operáre*—the nature of God's *activity*—is inherently related to the grammatical puzzle of *Deus est esse-ipsum.* If the subject and predicate nominative cannot be interchanged, as if they were appositives of one another, if *est* is no longer a special kind of intransitivity which links equivocal terms, *est* might be rendered *transitive*. God *perpetuates* being. Gilkey (1990, 58ff.) suggests that *Deus est esse ipsum* is too oversimplified to be adequate for Tillich's complex system. Yet Sharlemann's observation reveals some of the problems with the ways in which Tillich *describes* "God." Let us observe a few examples.

The God-Above-God:[1] For Tillich, if there is any God, God must be beyond any understanding of "God" which can be conceived. The juxtaposition of the "above" language is that the more "above" the God-above-God is, the more *transcendent*, the more participatory—and perhaps even *immanent*—the God-above-God has the potential to be (Choi 2000, 68). Charles Winquist (2003, 232) observed that within Tillich's thought the more *ultimate* the God-above-God is, the more *intimate* God may be conceived. The language of the God-above-God also indicates Tillich's strong indication of the divine as "unconditioned" and "unconditional." The use of the term *unconditioned* is for Tillich a linguistic ontic device to indicate the use of ontological language over other kinds of religious language. It indicates that the "concept of God" always differs from, and is epistemologically preceded by, *esse-ipsum* (32).

Ultimate Concern:[2] Because God is *the* ontological answer to *the* ontological question, God is "what concerns us ultimately" (Loomer 1956, 152). The question of personal ultimate concern, however, is an existential question regarding for what or whom one lives life. If what concerns someone ultimately is anything but *the* ontological answer—God—one has replaced *the* answer with another being or symbol. The absoluteness of the non-ontological answer to *the* theological

[1] See Tillich, *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* (1955) 82; *The Courage to Be* (1980) 15, 182, 186–190.

[2] For example, Tillich, *Courage to Be* (1980) 47, 82; *The Future of Religions* (1966a) 87; *The Spiritual Situation in Our Technical Society* (1988) 158–160, 166–167; *Dynamics of Faith* (1957a), 1ff.; *ST* 1.10, 12–14, 21, 24–25, 28, 36, 42, 50, 53, 110–11, 115, 118, 120–121, 124, 127, 131, 146, 148, 156, 211, 214–216, 218, 220–223, 230, 273; *Systematic Theology,* vol. 2 (1957b), 9, 14, 26, 30, 87, 116; and *Systematic Theology,* vol. 3 (1963) 102, 125, 130, 154, 223, 283, 287, 289, 293, 349, 422.

question then is *demonic,* since it "is that which has the power to threaten or save [one's] being" (Ryu 1984, 105). Russell McCutcheon (2001, 207), however, has criticized the term *ultimate concern* as a "widely repeated yet still empty claim" that reduces religion to a "personal value judgment." Martin Marty (2000, 11) writes, in Tillich's defense, that "Tillich's notion of ultimate concern allows us to consider 'religious' any belief systems that take up the meaning and purpose of human existence," so that the "intermingling of religion" with all aspects of life, when "understood as ultimate concern…is therefore inescapable." Tillich would agree that one's ultimate concern is not only *a* personal value judgment, but it is *the* only value judgment that may have ultimate meaning to the individual's existential location and condition.

The Ground and Structure of Being:[3] When our being is theonomous we are grounded in being; the *ground of being* represents all other beings' participation in *esse-ipsum* (Tillich 1966a, 37; Choi 2000, 5). As the ground of existence, *esse-ipsum* "is beyond essence and existence" (Ryu 1984, 116). Beyond this, though, Tillich writes: "God as being-itself is the ground of the ontological structure of being without being subject to this structure himself. He *is* the structure; that is, he has the power of determining the structure of everything that has being" (Tillich 1951, 238). God is not only the *ground* of being, but the *structure* of the same being of which he is the *ground*, since God cannot be subject to the structure of being. And further, God has *power* over the same structure that is equivocated with God; as the structure of being, God is the *end* of philosophy, as well as that which gives the structure meaning. God is the ontological question, the ontological answer, and the *prius* of ontology itself (Otto 1980, 306). Just as "God-above-God" signifies *transcendence* it does so by virtue of a juxtaposition of *immanence* (Thatamanil 2006, 139).

The Abyss and Depth of Being:[4] In *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* Tillich (1955, 82) writes of the lack of the ontological use of *is* in the Bible:

> Most people, including the biblical writers, take the word in its popular sense: something "is" if it can be found in the whole of potential experience. That which can be encountered within the whole of reality is real. Even the more sophisticated discussions about the existence or nonexistence of God often have this popular tinge. But, if God can be found within the whole of reality, then the whole of reality is the basic and dominant concept. God, then, is subject to the structure of reality…. The God who *is* a being is transcended by the God who is *Being* itself, the ground and abyss of every being.

[3] For example, see Tillich, *Systematic Theology,* vol. 1 (1951) 20–23, 26, 168–169, 205; *Systematic Theology,* vol, 2 (1957b) 7, 9, 10, 87, 126, 161, 167, 174; 3.99, 142, 190, 283–285, 290, 293–294.

[4] For example, see Tillich, *Systematic Theology,* vol 1 (1951) 79, 110, 113, 119, 156, 158–159, 164, 174, 216, 226; *Shaking of the Foundations* (1948), 52ff.

Although the use of "abyss" seems equivocal here, he elsewhere uses the notion of *abyss* to point to, in my own terminology, the *ground-grounding-ground of being*; a concept broadly rooted in Jacob Boheme's notion of *ungurd*; Schelling's *first potency*; Berdyave's *meonic freedom*; Rudolph Otto's *mysterium tremendum* and *fascinosium*; and Oskar Pfister's *ideal-realismus* (Ryu 1984, 118; Irwin 1974, 239; Ferré 1966, 11). For Boheme, for example, the abysmal notion of God is a term to remind us we cannot say "that God's Essence is a distinct thing, possessing a particular place or abode" that God is not a being among other beings, but "the abyss of nature and of creation is God himself" (Ferré 1966, 11). Kee Chung Ryu (1984, 120–21) suggests that the terms *ground* and *abyss* provide "a safeguard for the inscrutable mystery of God." *The depth of being* has a similar meaning for Tillich, again juxtaposing the image of the God-beyond-God (Tillich 1948, 57).

The Power of Being:[5] Theonomous thinking leads to accept the implication of *esse-ipsum*, and we then recognize the power of being within ourselves (Gilkey 1990, 102). Referring to the language of *The Courage to Be*, Donald Dreisbach (1993) explains the power of being as "an awareness of one's own being and vitality, of one's ability to seek and even establish meaning," adding that "this being or vitality is something of a gift and surprise" presented "neither symbolically nor as an object of conceptual thought." The power of being is the religious experience of *esse-ipsum* that is not a call to adherence to doctrine or literalisms, but rather a call to *becoming*, to *self-transcend* (Tavard 1964, 86). In the human person, the power of being gains its existential power because of the looming reality of death, of non-being (Hammond 1965, 98). The power of being presupposes all other descriptions of God, without human thinking there is no *prius* of theonomous thinking (Vaught 2005, 8). "Even a God would disappear," Tillich (1951, 164) wrote, "if he were not being-itself."

At bottom for Tillich, God is *mystery* (Thatamanil 2004, 28). "God can reveal Himself," Tillich once preached in a sermon (1948, 89), "only by remaining veiled." The experiences of non-being and of the *absence* of God in human life are also a mystery (Ryu 1984, 121; Gudmarsdotti 2007, 208). The language and concepts for God are not always consistent because they are dialectical, and for Tillich an absurd life should reflect an absurd theological conception of the divine. A significant problem remains of how does "God" remain the *prius* of thought and *esse-ipsum* simultaneously, not to mention being at the same time the structure, ground, abyss, and

[5] For example, see Tillich, *Courage to Be* (1980) 88–89, 159–160, 172–173; *Systematic Theology,* vol. 1 (1951) 137, 2.6, 8; 2.10, 11, 12, 20, 125; *Theology of Culture* (1964), 25–26; *Political Expectation* (1967b), 163.

power *of being* (Thomas 1977, 159)? Furthermore, does such a understanding of *esse-ipsum* have any meaning left?

II

Randall Otto (1980, 303) suggests that Tillich "has been described as a theist, a deist, a pantheist, a panentheist, a metaphysician, a mystic, an atheist, and a humanist." Though Tillich famously declared himself an atheist, he had to break and redefine the term *atheism* to describe himself in that way. The same could be said of the term *theism*: in some aspects, Tillich is a theist, and in others he is not. The negative theology and Christian mystical tradition is highly influential on Tillich's work; and Tillich also has some theological use for the "occult" mystical tradition (Tillich 1962, 166ff). Tillich described himself as a thinker who wished to combine humanism and Protestant theology in a co-authored, rarely cited text called *To Live as Men* (1965, 13). Between the dialectic of atheism and theism, a case could be made that Tillich was a dualist, pantheist, a panentheist, and an ecstatic naturalist (D. Foster 2007, 23). We will investigate these claims.

Dualism: Tillich's Platonic intellectual move of *esse-ipsum* creates a dualism (Lovejoy 1936, 315ff). William Rowe (1968, 82–83) summarized Tillich's statements about God in the following way:

1. God transcends the world.
2. Every finite thing participates in the world.
3. God cannot have a beginning and an end.
4. Non-being is literally nothing except in relation to God.
5. God precedes non-being in ontological validity.
6. God is his own beginning and end, the initial power of everything that is.

How is it, then, Rowe asks, "that to say, 'There *is* a God' is to be held as having no meaning, if 'every finite being depends on God for its existence?'" Rowe concludes that Tillich may really have *two* Gods in his system. Just as Plato had Socrates forward the notion of the good beyond all, "exceeding in dignity of power," in Book VI *The Republic* (Plato 1991, 509b) Glaucon responds to Socrates, recognizing the dualistic nature of the "good," swearing, "Apollo, what a demonic excess!" The excess here is that we may speak separately of (1) a "God" of which the faithful *might* speak, which is the ground, power, fountain, structure, and abyss of being; and (2) *esse-ipsum* as a separate entity.

Following this, *Esse-ipsum* is the "excess," as Tillich distinguishes between the first and second Gods within the phrase *God-above-God.* The second "god," *-God*, is easily lowered to a being among other beings, but -God may still be rendered to be a genuinely symbol which points toward the *God-above-*.

I include the second hyphen in the phrase "God-above-" (*esse-ipsum*) to indicate that to speak of *esse-ipsum* as "God" requires acknowledgement of symbolic language and the lower *-God*. *God-above-* requires *-God*: the two terms are "nominally deduced dialectically" from each other (Lovejoy 1936, 82). Tillich would have resisted this interpretation of himself, though the post-Christian move made in his final lecture—"The Significance of the History of Religions for the Systematic Theologian"—seems to silently acknowledge this problem and drop *both* the *-God* and the *God-above-* for a post-Christian move to *Geist* or *Spirit* (Zeitlow 1961, 8). Owen Thomas (2005, 5) criticizes Tillich for his dualism, writing, "[a]s one standing in the Neo-Platonist tradition," Tillich should have known better.

Panentheism: The most common interpretation of Tillich's understanding of God is that he is a pan*en*theist. Tillich's most popular writings suggest this fairly clearly; in the final pages of the third volume of his *Systematic Theology* (1963, 420–21) he describes divinity as an "eschatological pan-en-theism." In a sermon Tillich (1948, 9) preached that God "is the foundation on which all foundations are laid; and this foundation cannot be shaken," and "[o]n the boundaries of the finite the infinite becomes visible; in the light of the Eternal the transitoriness of the temporal appears." Tillich here recognizes the God-above-God, or *esse-ipsum,* as not only *that which nothing greater can be conceived*, but beyond *conception*: beyond "the totality of beings"; beyond the death of nature.

Tillich's panentheism is not so straightforward as to spatially and temporally *include* and *transcend* immanence but suggests a transcendence that is *contingent upon* immanence. Tillich (1951, 206) writes that "[t]he presence within finitude of an element which transcends it is experience both theoretically and practically" and that "potential infinity is present in actual finitude." In this sense, panentheism is a metaphor for the dialectic of the *perception* of human finitude and the *potential* for self-transcendence in the immanence of the present (Schonenberg 1976, 2.274). Panentheism for Tillich is less an actual description of God than another symbol which describes the existential condition.

Deism: Although a minority view on Tillich, process theologians John Cobb and David Griffin have criticized Tillich for being a deist, that God does not in the present time have a participatory relationship with the world. Cobb and Griffin (1976, 51) write that Tillich's "being itself" is "not 'a being' interacting with others" and that Tillich's conception of the divine "involves a denial that God is a casual influence on the world, even though much of Tillich's language illegitimately gives the impression that creative influence is exerted by God." In other words, from their perspective Tillich's God does not presently perpetuate being in the world. Furthermore, they argue, Tillich "held that participation and individuality are polar, so that the more we participate with others in community the more we can become individuals, and

the more we become individuals, the more richly we participate in community." Solipsistic understandings of humanity are then "illusory" (82). The claim that Tillich is a deist, then, is not about the alien transcendence so often implied in the term but rather that the *existential meaning* of Tillich's God has little to do with any sense of *esse-ipsum* as the perpetuation force of being; instead, participation with the divine is more about a *perceived interpretation* that leads to theonomous thinking and living (Grigg 2006, 16).

Pantheism: A minority view of Tillich is that he is a pantheist separate from an *ecstatic naturalism.* A pantheist view of Tillich is a misreading of his work. The similarity of *esse-ipsum* to Baruch Spinoza's notion of *substance*, for example—along with Tillich's affinity for Spinoza—is often reduced by some in the same way Friedrich Schleiermacher criticized Spinoza and his pantheistic "Spinozism" (O'Connor 2004, 423). One reason for this position is because of Tillich's consistent rejection of what he calls, as early as 1939, "exclusive monotheism," that is, "God as the Lord of time controlling the universal history of mankind, acting in history and through history" (Tillich 1967b, 27). Playing on the assumption that what is not a *classical theism* must be a *pantheism*, some critics made the assumption that Tillich *must* be a pantheist, since he was definitely not a classical theist (K. Foster 1964, 100). A close reading of Tillich, however, does suggest a *kind* of pantheism at work, partially because there is a sense of recognizing that if "God" exists outside of nature—if there is a spatial or temporal transcendence—that transcendence is related to the reality of the parameters of nature itself (Tillich 1951, 233; Ferré 1966, 11).

Ecstatic Naturalism: The term "ecstatic naturalism" can mean a number of different things, but here I employ the term in the way in which Tillichian interpreters have, namely, that it is a kind of pantheism which allows for transcendence. Robert Corrington (1994, 18) defines it "as that moment within naturalism when it recognizes its self-transcending character" characterized by a "transition from preformal potencies to the realms of signification in the world." Tillich himself alludes to this idea only somewhat directly once, in a rather unknown book review (1940, 71–72), coining the term "neo-naturalism," but he adds that "I do not think that the question of the name is very important." In the *Systematic Theology* (1951, 233) a new kind of naturalism arises from a recognition of the inadequacy and misuse of the term *pantheism*: that divinity should never be *equated* with nature. Further, God "is not the totality of natural objects," either, but instead "the creative power and unity of nature, the absolute substance which is present in everything." *Pantheism* in this sense, Tillich claims "is as necessary for a Christian doctrine of God as the mystical element of the divine presence" (234).

Tillich's sense of "panentheism" is a different kind of panentheism than the popular usage of the term; to use the term in any other way is a "myth" or "absurdity"

(Tillich 1957b, 6). As an *ecstatic naturalism*, the primary idea is *power of Being*. "Being itself," Tillich (1964, 25–26) wrote, "is a power of Being but not the most powerful being; it is neither *ens realissimum* nor *ens singularissimum*": *a* power of being, not *the* power of being. *Esse-ipsum*, as *the* power of being, "is the power in every thing that has power, be it a universal or an individual, a thing or an experience." The power of being is the power of self-transcendence for humans or the potential power of things or experiences to transition from the not-yet-holy to becoming religious symbols (Irwin 1974, 252), An ecstatic naturalism, as Nels Ferré (1957, 231–32, 1966, 11) has interpreted Tillich, denies "a world beyond this world" and points toward the possibility for the experience of the holy *transcending* into the *immanence* of this world; there is limit to nature.

Tillich's ecstatic naturalism is also closely related to Tillich's idea of the *depth* of being. The depth of being is described by Thomas Altizer (1958, 10) as "the ultimate ground of the being which we now are." Jacob Taubes (1954, 21) explains the depth of being as indicative of what he calls "Dionysiac theology," that is, "an 'ecstatic naturalism' that interprets all supernaturalistic symbols in immanent terms." Ideas or terms which suggest *transcendence* dialectically relate, clash, and *theonomize* with immanent terms (Altizer 1958, 10; Herberg 1974, 5). In the process of theonomy, at the *edge* of language—approaching the *prius* of thinking—symbolic religious language implodes, self-subverts, negates and resurrects. *Transcendence* and *immanence* have, as much as they can, taken on new meanings for Tillich, and he has in turn re-rooted the terminology into that which is 'unconditional' as symbolic language. The ideas have come into new meaning, which demonstrates the advantage of considering Tillich as an ecstatic naturalist.

III

At bottom, this complex pantheon of theisms within Tillich's thought is indicative of a radical religious thinker attempting to preach the Christian Gospel to a new, secularized and secularizing audience. Following Tillich's death, Carl Braaten argued that Tillich should be considered a "radical theologian" who "searched into the depths of the tradition to find positive answers to the questions of modern man" (Braaten 1967, xxxiii). Tillich's later writings came under scrutiny by some authors for being "insufficiently radical" (Dewart 1966, 39). Even though Tillich famously told Thomas Altizer that "der real Tillich is der Radical Tillich" (Grigg 2006, 142; Foster 2007, 23), Altizer wrote in a review essay (1963, 62) on Tillich that Tillich had missed the opportunity to "become a new Luther" had he extended "his principle of justification by doubt to a theological affirmation of the death of God."

Tillich's writings demonstrate a profound respect for Friedrich Nietzsche that was well ahead of his time for his American audience, who had not yet entirely recovered Nietzsche from NAZI revisionist philosophy. For Tillich, Nietzsche was, along with Karl Marx, one of "[t]he greatest anti-Christians in recent history," who

showed his "Christian roots with every word" (Tillich 1996, 32). As an "atheist," Nietzsche points toward the 'problem' of God—"the poor idea of God"—better than "many faithful Christians" could (Tillich 1948, 42). To speak of the "death of God," in a literal sense, Tillich (1967a, 201). Instead, Tillich suggests that Nietzsche's declaration of the death of God places an exigency upon the immanence of "life," father than upon the God of tradition (207). In this sense, the death of God "is felt both as a loss and a liberation" (1980, 142).

Beyond this, Nietzsche's attack on the Christian God for Tillich was an attack upon what he called "theological theism." Theological theism, according to Tillich, is a conception of the divine which is based upon theological arguments, "dependent upon the religious substance which it conceptualizes" (184). This kind of theism leads to an acknowledgement that the most religious conceptions of God are easily argued away, often with the exact same arguments used to argue for God's existence. As such, Tillich suggest that the idea of the God-above-God separates which Gods can be killed—and should be—in favor of a higher conception of God that is no longer demonic or idolatrous (15). The God-above-God, as the ontological foundation of beings and things, is not a thing among other things (Grigg 2006, 143). This onto-epistemological shift "is the deepest root of atheism," Tillich (1980, 185) wrote, "[i]t is an atheism which is justified as the reaction against theological theism and its disturbing implications."

In this sense of the term *atheism*—that is, a denial of theological theism—Tillich is an atheist, and perhaps more specifically, a *Christian* atheist. Although some of Tillich's works pass off atheism as a kind of theological theism (that is, a theological *atheism*), atheism is often employed by Tillich as a philosophical *tool* in some of his later writings. Tillich wrote:

> The atheistic terminology of mysticism is striking. It leads beyond God to the Unconditioned, transcending any fixation of the divine as an object. But we have the same feeling of the inadequacy of all limiting names for God in a non-mystical religion. Genuine religion without an element of atheism cannot be imagined. It is not by chance that not only Socrates, but also the Jews and early Christians were persecuted as atheists. For those who adhered to the powers, they were atheists. (Tillich 1964, 25)

Tillich here refers to the atheistic language of the mystical tradition who offered a *via negativa* toward God in their writings. When Meister Eckhart prays "that God rid me of God," Tillich (1966b, 65) wrote, this is an atheism that "is a correct response to the 'objectively' existing God of literalistic thought." At the same time, for Tillich any theological thinking that resists literalistic thinking about God is, as an atheism, connected to this mystical tradition; and, as Tillich was quoted above, *genuine religion without an element of atheism cannot be imagined.* If Christianity is to be genuine or authentic one must reject literalistic thinking, but one must also epistemologically acknowledge that doubt is essential to faith, which is a primary argument throughout Tillich's thought. Furthermore, the "atheism" of Socrates or the early Christians is one defined by power relationships; those with power define their own literalistic conceptions of deity as absolute and all others as atheistic. This sense of *atheism* is a political definition that is expressed theologically—by *theological theisms.*

Tillich writes in his first volume of the Systematic Theology (1951, 27) that atheism is "anti-Christian on Christian terms." If the term *Christian* refers to a literalistic religion, then the atheist who rejects this Christianity is, as it happens, doing so for genuinely Christian reasons. "Nietzsche," Tillich wrote, "acknowledged this when he said that he had the blood of his greatest enemies—the priests-within himself." This points to "the paradox of Christian humanism," namely, that anti-Christian thinking is, "within the Western world, the substance of what is Christian" (Tillich 1996, 32). To this end, *anti-Christian or Christian atheist thinking is necessary for an authentic expression of Christian faith.* Christianity only stays relevant to the current situation by virtue of its ability to have "continuous self-negation." Without this *semper negativa*, Tillich writes, "Christianity is not true Christianity," because Christianity that is not perpetually negating is irrelevant (52).

Tillich, then, famously declared that "God does not exist" in his *Systematic Theology.* Although Tillich denied 'God' to affirm God as *being-itself* "beyond essence and existence," one must *deny* God to affirm a *kind* of Godhead: "[t]o argue that God exists is to deny him" (Tillich 1951, 205). Tillich's claim that "God does not exist" is to be understood, Edgar Towne (2003, 26) observes, "both literally *and* symbolically": it is to say that God is not a being, but being-itself, which has no being beyond the *power of* and *fountain of* being. Towne observes, "[t]his is the epitome of postmodern irony!"

Tillich was regularly criticized throughout his career for using philosophical and theological language for God that is obscure and intentionally misleading. A legendary example of this point surrounds an occasion when Tillich was invited to present a paper at the prestigious New York Philosophy Club. After Tillich delivered the paper—on the ontology of the "ground of being"—the esteemed philosophers in the audience took turns responding. Finally, when G. E. Moore (who famously coined "Moore's paradox") spoke, he replied to Tillich, "I am sorry to say that there is not a single sentence that Professor Tillich has uttered that I was able to understand—not a single sentence!" (Coburn 1996, 3) The problem with understanding Tillich is that the difficulty of his own language is both *indicative* and a *consequent* of an implied belief in the inadequacy of language within his theological system. Tillich himself even proposed a "thirty-year moratorium" on the use of theological language (Tillich 1966b, 65).

Deus est esse ipsum is an example of what Tillich (1968, 162) calls "theonomous" thinking—thinking which is neither autonomous nor heneronomous. This kind of thinking requires the "courage" to "affirm the power of being," he suggests, "whether we know it or not" (Tillich 1980, 181). This courage transgresses against nominalism; it points us toward the edge of language and toward courageous reflection where traditional constructions are theonomously transcended. This new thinking blurs the line between what is "theological" and "philosophical"; it requires us to traverse into what Gabriel Vahanian (2006) calls "a new religious paradigm."

Theonomous thinking engages the *depth* of both reason and being of philosophy, theology, humanism, existentialism, and religious experience (Tillich 1951, 238–239). Such thinking, Jeffrey Robbins (2003, xvii) suggests, "reveal[s] the depth dimensions

of a culture"; and as such, Tillich's thought walks the tightrope between theism and atheism (Schneider 1992, 422). If *esse-ipsum* is "the ground of both dynamics and form," Thatamanil (2006, 108) writes, "then it will not do to conceive of God solely on static terms." For Tillich, God is experienced by us through self-reflection and through participation in religious symbols, which leads us to begin to dynamically think theonomously.

But in this new kind of thinking, philosophical and theological language is re-appropriated, redefined, and even dismembered. Even if Tillich's "God" might be best as an ecstatic naturalism, the radical, theonomous *thinking* required to make sense of this divinity is prioritized over the specific details of this "God." Tillich's theology invites us into a radical theology for the reader to enter; acceptance does not seem to be important, only that we walk with Tillich and begin to think God anew in a context that is contemporary and relevant to the situation. To do otherwise—to unconditionally accept or unequivocally reject—is to reduce oneself into a theological theism, even if the rejection is theologically atheistic.

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