

# The Ground of Being and the Dynamics of Ultimate Concern: A Comprehensive Analysis of Paul Tillich's Ontological Theology and Its Contemporary Global Legacy

The theological system developed by Paul Tillich represents one of the most significant intellectual reconciliations between classical Christian thought and the existentialist anxieties of the twentieth century. At the heart of this system lies a radical reconstruction of the divine, moving away from the "theistic personalism" that defines God as a supreme entity among others, and toward an ontological understanding of God as the "Ground of Being" or "Being-itself".<sup>1</sup> This reconstruction is inextricably linked to Tillich's definition of faith as "ultimate concern," a state of being grasped by that which determines one's being or non-being.<sup>4</sup> By repositioning the divine as the foundational reality undergirding all existence, Tillich sought to provide a framework for meaning that could withstand the collapse of traditional religious structures and the "ontological shock" of modern history.<sup>1</sup> The impact of this shift resonates today across diverse fields, including existential psychology, civil rights ethics, ecological ontology, and the rise of contemporary pluralism and secular spirituality.<sup>7</sup>

## The Ontological Reconstruction: God as the Ground of Being

The foundational premise of Tillich's theology is the rejection of God as a "being" in the traditional sense. Tillich argued that to speak of God as "a being" is to subject the divine to the categories of finitude—space, time, and causality—thereby turning God into an object alongside other objects.<sup>1</sup> If God were merely the highest being, the question of what created God would remain, leading to a logical impasse that undermines the divine as the absolute source of all reality.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, Tillich posited that God is *esse ipsum*, or "Being-itself," the "Ground of Being" upon which all finite beings exist and from which they proceed.<sup>2</sup>

### Being-Itself and the Power of Being

In affirming that God is being-itself, Tillich intended to convey the idea of the "power of being." This power is manifested in the structure of all things, yet it transcends them.<sup>1</sup> For Tillich, God is the "infinite and inexhaustible depth" that makes existence possible.<sup>12</sup> This depth is not a "world behind the world" but the "ecstatic" character of the current world as its transcendent ground.<sup>2</sup>

By defining God in this way, Tillich aimed to make the question of God's existence a "dead issue".<sup>12</sup> He contended that theologians should focus on the ontological implications of finitude rather than providing elaborate proofs for God's existence.<sup>12</sup> If one recognizes that "life is not shallow" and that there is a "depth in life," one cannot truly be an atheist, for the very power by which one thinks, doubts, or exists is an affirmation of the Ground of Being.<sup>12</sup>

<b>Category</b>	<b>Traditional Theistic Personalism</b>	<b>Tillichian Ontological Theology</b>
<b>Ontological Status</b>	A supreme being/entity among others	Being-itself ( <i>esse ipsum</i> ); the Ground of Being
<b>Relationship to Finitude</b>	Subject to categories of space and time	The ground of the structure of all beings
<b>Divine Transcendence</b>	Residing in a "supernatural" realm	The "unconditional" depth within the concrete
<b>Atheism</b>	Possible as the rejection of a specific entity	Impossible; denial affirms the power of being
<b>Conceptual Form</b>	Personal, agential deity	Supra-personal Power of Being

As detailed in the comparison above, Tillich's model moves the divine away from literalist objectification. He believed that the objectification or "thingification" of God was a form of blasphemy, as it limits the infinite to the realm of the finite.<sup>12</sup> Instead, he proposed that God is the answer to the question implied in man's finitude, a name for that which concerns humanity ultimately.<sup>3</sup> This immanence does not collapse into pantheism because God, as the Ground, includes and transcends all ontological polarities—such as individualization and participation—without being dissolved by them.<sup>3</sup>

## **The God Above God and the Protestant Principle**

To address the collapse of traditional religious language in the wake of the horrors of the twentieth century, Tillich introduced the concept of the "God above God".<sup>1</sup> This term describes the divine reality that emerges when the "God of theism"—the culturally and historically constructed image of God—disappears in the "anxiety of doubt".<sup>1</sup> This concept is central to his work *The Courage to Be*, where he argues that "absolute faith" is the courage to accept meaninglessness and "accept our acceptance" by a power that transcends all personal and

institutional categories.<sup>14</sup>

Parallel to this is the "Protestant Principle," a critical and self-critical power that Tillich believed was the core of the Reformation.<sup>18</sup> This principle serves as a "religious reservation" against any absolute claim made by a relative, historical reality—be it a church, a state, or a scientific system.<sup>18</sup> It asserts that the only absolute truth is that man cannot attain absolute truth, and that the "final word" belongs only to the unconditional depth of the Ground of Being.<sup>18</sup>

## Faith as Ultimate Concern: The Dynamics of the Human Spirit

If God is the Ground of Being, then faith is the "state of being ultimately concerned".<sup>4</sup> Tillich's definition of faith shifts the emphasis from the *content* of belief to its *psychic character*.<sup>4</sup> Whatever an individual regards as ultimately important in their life becomes, in effect, the object or subject of their faith.<sup>4</sup> This definition is intended to be broad and inclusive, connecting the religious dimension to all aspects of human culture.<sup>5</sup>

### The Criteria of Ultimacy: Surrender and Fulfillment

An ultimate concern is an unconditional concern that calls for the allegiance of the whole self—emotionally, volitionally, and intellectually.<sup>4</sup> Tillich identified two primary characteristics of this state:

1. **Total Surrender:** The ultimate concern demands the sacrifice of all other interests. If a nation, success, or money becomes an ultimate concern, it "subsumes" all other values, such as justice, family, or truth, in its service.<sup>22</sup>
2. **Total Fulfillment:** The concern promises a completion and meaning that transcends the anxieties of finite existence, regardless of the sacrifices made.<sup>22</sup>

Tillich distinguished ultimate concern from "preliminary concerns"—matters like food, shelter, or status—which are necessary for existence but do not reach the level of ultimacy unless they are idolatrously elevated.<sup>5</sup> For Tillich, the "root of idolatry" is the confusion of a religious symbol or a finite object with the ultimate reality toward which it is intended to point.<sup>5</sup>

### The Ubiquity of Religion and the Experience of the Unconditional

By defining faith as ultimate concern, Tillich argued that "everyone is religious".<sup>23</sup> No human mind is entirely without an ultimate concern, as everyone must find something that gives meaning and purpose to their lives.<sup>23</sup> Even serious doubt, despair, or the denial of God can be a testimony to the unconditional, provided the individual is "passionate" about the question of meaning.<sup>18</sup> In this framework, "he who seriously denies God affirms him," because the seriousness of the denial reflects an encounter with an absolute claim upon one's person.<sup>18</sup>

Type of Concern	Characteristics	Examples	Spiritual Result
<b>Preliminary Concern</b>	Conditional, partial, finite	Wealth, health, social status	Functional survival
<b>Ultimate Concern</b>	Unconditional, holistic, total	Justice, Truth, The Divine	Determination of Being
<b>Idolatrous Concern</b>	Elevation of finite to status of ultimate	Radical nationalism, "Money-God"	Demonization/Destruction

This understanding of faith allows for a "latent residue" of religion in experiences that may appear secular.<sup>22</sup> Tillich's "Theology of Culture" explores how the substance of religion is found in the depths of culture, and how culture provides the forms through which the religious concern expresses itself.<sup>7</sup> He famously formulated this relationship: "religion is the substance of culture, culture is the form of religion".<sup>23</sup>

## Religious Symbols: The Language of the Ground of Being

Because the Ground of Being is not a finite object, it cannot be described in literal, scientific language. Tillich argued that all religious language and assertions about God must be symbolic.<sup>3</sup> He distinguished between "signs," which are consciously invented and point to things without participating in their reality, and "symbols," which grow out of the collective human experience and participate in the power and meaning of that to which they point.<sup>4</sup>

### Participation and the Broken Myth

A genuine religious symbol "opens up levels of reality" that are otherwise inaccessible, such as the aesthetic dimensions revealed by art or the spiritual depths revealed by prayer.<sup>22</sup> Symbols grow and die within human cultures based on their power to initiate participation and express the ultimate concerns of a group.<sup>4</sup> Tillich emphasized that religious symbols must be recognized as symbols to avoid the trap of literalism, which he saw as a primary driver of modern atheism.<sup>1</sup>

The "broken myth" is a central concept in Tillich's theory of language. A myth is "broken" when it is understood as a myth—a symbolic configuration—rather than a literal historical account.<sup>22</sup> For example, the stories of the Creation and the Fall are not historical incidents for Tillich, but symbolic expressions of the gap between man's "essential goodness" and his "existential estrangement".<sup>10</sup> He argued that any attempt to replace myths with scientific substitutes would

fail because myths are the only language capable of signifying ultimate concern.<sup>22</sup>

## Art and the Aesthetic Symbol

Tillich frequently looked to the world of art to explain the functioning of religious symbols.<sup>4</sup> A work of art is itself a symbol that points to a meaning beyond its material form.<sup>4</sup> In his "Theology of Culture," he suggested that an "ultimate dimension" is apparent in secular art, even those without an explicitly religious theme, because they reflect the existential questions of the human condition.<sup>21</sup> This perspective allowed Tillich to engage with modern artistic movements—such as Expressionism—as prophetic voices that revealed the anxieties and strivings of the twentieth century.<sup>20</sup>

## The Method of Correlation: Bridging the Secular and the Sacred

Tillich's systematic theology is built upon the "Method of Correlation," a dialectical strategy designed to resolve the "historical and systematic riddle" of how the Christian message relates to the modern mind.<sup>32</sup> This method structures theology as a dialogue between the existential questions raised by the human situation and the theological answers provided by the Christian faith.<sup>21</sup>

## The Dynamic of Question and Answer

In using the method of correlation, the theologian makes an analysis of the human situation through disciplines like philosophy, psychology, and sociology to identify the "existential questions".<sup>21</sup> These questions—concerning finitude, anxiety, guilt, and the search for meaning—are then correlated with the symbols of the Christian message, which are presented as the "answers".<sup>32</sup>

<b>Volume of Systematic Theology</b>	<b>Existential Question/Situation</b>	<b>Theological Answer/Symbol</b>
<b>Volume 1</b>	The structure of Reason; Finitude	Revelation; The Ground of Being (God)
<b>Volume 2</b>	Existence and Estrangement	The New Being in the Christ
<b>Volume 3</b>	The ambiguities of Life; The meaning of History	The Spirit; The Kingdom of God

Tillich insisted that the answers are "spoken" to human existence from beyond it, rather than being derived from the questions themselves.<sup>21</sup> However, the form and content of the answers are influenced by the cultural climate in which they are formulated.<sup>30</sup> Critics have noted that this "question-answer relationship" can lead to distortion, as the framing of the question may restrict the scope of the theological response.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, for Tillich, this method was the only way to avoid both "static orthodoxy" and "over-compromising liberalism".<sup>33</sup>

## Impact on Existential Psychology and the Healing of the Soul

One of Tillich's most profound impacts has been on the development of existential psychology and psychotherapy, particularly through his influence on figures like Rollo May and his conceptual parallels with Viktor Frankl.<sup>13</sup>

### Typology of Anxiety and the Courage to Be

Tillich's analysis of anxiety in *The Courage to Be* provides a sophisticated framework for understanding the modern psychological epidemic of meaninglessness.<sup>38</sup> He distinguished between "fear," which has a specific object that can be faced, and "anxiety," which is the "ontological awareness of non-being" and has no object.<sup>16</sup>

He categorized existential anxiety into three forms:

1. **Ontic Anxiety (Fate and Death):** The threat to physical existence and the awareness of contingency.<sup>14</sup>
2. **Spiritual Anxiety (Emptiness and Meaninglessness):** The threat to the search for an ultimate concern and the loss of a meaning that gives meaning to all meanings.<sup>14</sup>
3. **Moral Anxiety (Guilt and Condemnation):** The awareness of the ambiguity between good and evil and the failure to actualize one's potential.<sup>14</sup>

Tillich argued that "courage" is not the removal of anxiety, but the power to affirm one's own being "in spite of" the threat of non-being.<sup>13</sup> This courage is rooted in the Ground of Being and the "God above God," which provides a foundation for self-affirmation when all traditional supports have collapsed.<sup>14</sup>

### Tillich, Rollo May, and Viktor Frankl

Rollo May, a close friend and student of Tillich, is considered the "father" of American existential psychotherapy.<sup>37</sup> May's work, including *The Meaning of Anxiety* and *The Courage to Create* (named after Tillich's work), was deeply influenced by Tillich's ontological explorations of the human predicament.<sup>13</sup> Tillich and May engaged in an "intellectual dialogue" that bridged the fields of religion and psychology, focusing on how individuals can live authentically in the face

of modern despair.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, Tillich's concept of "ultimate concern" shares significant contact points with Viktor Frankl's "will to meaning".<sup>36</sup> While Frankl, a survivor of concentration camps, focused on humanity's ability to create meaning in the most visceral of circumstances, Tillich focused on the structural reconnecting of the human person to the "essential ground" from which they have been estranged.<sup>36</sup> Both scholars rejected a purely medical model of psychotherapy, viewing the search for meaning as a fundamental existential reality rather than a pathological state.<sup>36</sup>

## **Social Justice and the Civil Rights Movement: The Influence on Martin Luther King Jr.**

Tillich's impact on the world today is perhaps most evident in his influence on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. King first encountered Tillich's writings as a student and eventually chose Tillich's conception of God as the subject of his doctoral dissertation.<sup>9</sup>

### **Segregation as Existential Sin**

King absorbed Tillich's existentialist theology and used it to analyze the situation of Black Americans in the context of racial segregation.<sup>44</sup> He adopted Tillich's definition of sin as "separation" or "estrangement"—the state of being separated from the ground of one's being, from other beings, and from oneself.<sup>9</sup> King argued that segregation was "morally wrong" because it was an "existential expression of man's tragic separation" and deprived individuals of the freedom to shape their own destiny.<sup>44</sup>

### **Love, Power, and Justice in the Social Sphere**

Both Tillich and King constructed their social ethics using a "love-justice relationship model".<sup>44</sup> Tillich's *Love, Power, and Justice* argued that these three elements are ontologically linked: power is the drive of everything to maintain its own being, love is the drive toward the reunion of the separated, and justice is the form that this reunion takes in a structural sense.<sup>27</sup> This framework provided King with a theological justification for nonviolent resistance, as he sought to achieve a "Kingdom of God" on earth characterized by equality, justice, and the "Spiritual Presence" in human affairs.<sup>44</sup>

## **Religious Socialism and the Critique of Modern Civilization**

Tillich's early career in Germany was marked by his leadership in the "Religious Socialist" movement.<sup>7</sup> He believed that the horrors of the First World War revealed an "intolerable gap" between religion and culture, and he sought a "socialist decision" on religious grounds to

address the socio-political predicament of his time.<sup>7</sup>

## The Socialist Principle and the Demonic

Tillich's socialism was not merely an economic theory, but a "wholistic change" in the way people interact to realize the fullness of their being.<sup>47</sup> He critiqued the "demonic structure of capitalism," which he believed commodified human labor and treated people as instrumentally worthwhile means rather than intrinsically worthwhile ends.<sup>46</sup> His 1933 work, *The Socialist Decision*, warned against the "political romanticism" of the Nazi movement, which he saw as an idolatrous elevation of the myths of "blood and soil".<sup>27</sup>

Political Element	Tillich's Religious Socialist View	Modern Application/Impact
Nationalism	A "demon" that elevates the finite to ultimacy	Critique of modern authoritarianism
Capitalism	Commodifies humanity and separates labor	Basis for religious critiques of materialism
Justice	The "form" of love in the social structure	Core principle for social justice movements
The Kingdom	Fragmentarily achieved through justice	Orienting vision for democratic socialism

Tillich envisioned a "unified harmonious socialist community" inspired by Christian ideals of political equality and justice.<sup>27</sup> His legacy as an outspoken champion of democratic socialism continues to influence contemporary public theology and efforts toward "just peacemaking".<sup>46</sup>

## Ecology of Being: Tillich's Influence on Environmental Theology

While the modern environmental movement arose after Tillich's peak influence, his theological enterprise has become a "fertile and valuable resource" for contemporary ecotheologians.<sup>8</sup> Scholars have performed a "critical retrieval" of his work to develop an "ecology of being" or an "ecological ontology".<sup>8</sup>

## Nature as the Manifestation of the Ground of Being

Tillich was critical of the "technical civilization" that had brought about the "tremendous

devastation of original nature".<sup>51</sup> He lamented that humanity had lost the ability to "live with nature" and instead sought only to dominate and exploit it.<sup>51</sup> In his view, nature is not a collection of dead objects, but is "manifested in the structure of beings" and participates in the "creative ground".<sup>1</sup>

Tillich's "Theology of Nature" steer a middle course between three extremes:

- **Barthian Confessionalism:** Which tends to separate the divine from the natural world.<sup>8</sup>
- **Sentimental Romanticism:** Which may over-idealize nature without addressing its ambiguities.<sup>8</sup>
- **Liberal Protestant Technocratism:** Which views nature purely as a resource for human use.<sup>8</sup>

By applying Tillich's "ontology of love" to the non-human world, ecological theologians argue for an environmental ethic that recognizes the "multidimensional unity of life".<sup>8</sup> This approach envisions humans as "priests to creation," responsible for the "reunion" and "universal salvation" of all being, not just human being.<sup>50</sup>

## Religious Pluralism and the Contemporary Spirituality Movement

Tillich's theology has had a profound impact on the study of religious pluralism and the contemporary cultural shift toward "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR) identities.<sup>7</sup>

### John Hick and the Transcategorical Real

The philosopher John Hick built upon Tillich's foundations to formulate his "Pluralistic Hypothesis".<sup>54</sup> Hick utilized a Kantian distinction to argue that the "Real *an sich*" (the ultimate reality in itself) transcends all human categories, while the various world religions represent different culturally and historically shaped ways of experiencing and conceiving that Real.<sup>54</sup> Tillich's "Ground of Being" provided the ontological space for Hick's "Real," allowing for a dialogue between personal and impersonal conceptions of the divine.<sup>56</sup>

### The SBNR Phenomenon and Romanticism

Tillich's "Theology of Culture" anticipated the rise of individualistic spiritualities that disparage traditional religion.<sup>7</sup> He observed that the British empirical tradition had separated the "spirit" from its cognitive functions, identifying it only with emotion and will—a linguistic shift that he believed led to the modern perception of a difference between "religion" and "spirituality".<sup>53</sup>

Feature	Institutional Religion	Tillichian/SBNR Spirituality
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<b>Subject</b>	Dogma, piety, and church needs	Ultimate concern within culture
<b>Language</b>	Literal doctrine and kerygma	Broken myths and artistic symbols
<b>Authority</b>	Institutional and heteronomous	Autonomy and the "God above God"
<b>Scope</b>	Restricted to the "sacred" realm	Universal; found in all creative functions

By defining the sacred as that which an individual takes with "ultimate seriousness," Tillich provided a "sophisticated attempt to transform the word 'religion' into a genuinely useful concept" for a secular age.<sup>23</sup> This has had a "durable effect" on the study of religion and culture, helping scholars understand the "sacred depths" present in popular culture, art, and political movements.<sup>7</sup>

## Critical Evaluations: The Atheism and Intellectualism of Tillich

Despite his widespread influence, Tillich's system has faced vigorous study and critique regarding its epistemology and its compatibility with traditional orthodoxy.<sup>57</sup>

### The Hook-Tillich Debate: The Charge of Atheism

One of the most persistent critiques came from analytical philosophers like Sidney Hook, who argued that Tillich's definition of God was essentially a form of atheism.<sup>12</sup> Hook and others contended that by defining God as "Being-itself" and asserting that "to argue that God exists is to deny him," Tillich had abandoned any meaningful distinction between the divine and the natural order.<sup>12</sup> These critics viewed Tillich's "pure absolute" as a "sub-personal reservoir of power" that lacked the consciousness, life, and agential nature required by the religious point of view.<sup>2</sup>

### Intellectualism and Biblical Adequacy

Theologians from more conservative or evangelical traditions have criticized Tillich's "strident intellectualism" as potentially a "last gasp of religious futility".<sup>18</sup> They argue that his Method of Correlation selectively restricts the Christian message to fit philosophical questions, thereby distorting biblical truth.<sup>21</sup> Some critics feel that his "eschatological imagery" became so vague that it offered "little spiritual comfort to the layman" and lacked the "earthly imminence" of the

biblical account of the Word becoming flesh.<sup>16</sup>

## The Demographic of Disillusionment

Irving Kristol, reviewing Tillich's *The Protestant Era*, suggested that while Tillich's approach was sensitive to history, it was perhaps a product of "sophisticated disillusionment" rather than "primitive, uncontained faith".<sup>18</sup> Kristol noted that while Tillich's intellect could "swallow whole" the mysteries of religion, his analysis might be "cast up again without effect" by those seeking traditional certainty in a period of mass collectivism and disintegration.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of the Ground of Being

Paul Tillich's reconstruction of God as the Ground of Being and faith as ultimate concern has proven to be a transformative framework for navigating the "ontological shock" of the modern world. By moving the divine out of the realm of supernatural entities and into the depth structures of reality, Tillich provided a way for religious symbols to remain vital in a secular, post-mythological age.<sup>1</sup>

His legacy is characterized by its interdisciplinary reach, influencing the "very enterprise" of religious studies and the liberal theological agenda of the late twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> Whether through the existential courage of psychotherapists, the social justice ethics of Martin Luther King Jr., or the ecological ontologies of modern environmentalists, Tillich's thought continues to bridge the gap between "the unconditioned meaning" and the "conditioned forms" of human culture.<sup>48</sup> In an era still marked by the anxieties of meaninglessness and the threats of non-being, the "God who appears when God has disappeared" remains a central pillar for those seeking a "power of acceptance" in the depth of life.<sup>16</sup>

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