

We tend to think of God as a big man with a beard, or some sort of powerful "person" like a human being, although one who can do amazing things. This is just the childish version, it is conditioned in our thinking by a pedestrian approach to religion.

There are religions that don't have a "God" per se, such as Buddhism. Essentially, there is no reason to think of God as a person, certainly not one with a corporeal body. That image, which is hinted at in the Bible, is merely metaphor. Depending upon the religious tradition, however, one can have very abstract views of God which have nothing to do with a father figure or a mother figure.

There is a more abstract way to think about God: that is "Transcendental Signifier;" the notion of a metaphysical first principle that organizes everything into a metaphysical hierarchy. This is the more sophisticated view of God, and most of the works of the great Christian philosophers hint at notions of God in these abstract terms.

Anselm defined God as "that which nothing greater than can be conceived." He ended all of his arguments by saying "this thing we call God," as a means of keeping the exact nature of God open ended. This is because God is beyond our understanding, as the Bible says, but we can leave a "place marker" for the concept of God by understanding that the ultimate logical function of the God concept is that of the transcendental signifier.

### Ground of Being

One of the sophisticated concepts used by great Christian theologians is that of "The Ground of Being." This concept indicates, not that God is the fact of things existing, but that God is the basis for the existence of all things. God is more fundamental to existing things than anything else. So fundamental to the existence of all things is God, that God can be thought of as the basis upon which things exist, the ground their being. To say that God is The ground of being or being itself, is to say that there is something we can sense that is so special about the nature of being that it hints at this fundamental reality upon which all else is based.

The phrases "Ground of Being" and "Being itself" are basically the same concept. Tillich used both at different times, and other theologians such as John McQuarrey prefer "Being Itself," but they really speak to the same concept. Now Sceptics are always asking "how can god be being?" I think this question comes from the fact that the term is misleading. The term "Being itself" gives one the impression that God is the actual fact of "my existence," or the existence of my flowerbed, or any object one might care to name. Paul Tillich, on the other hand, said explicitly (in Systematic Theology Vol. I) that this does not refer to an existential fact but to an ontological status. What is being said is not that God is the fact of the being of some particular object, but, that he is the basis upon which being proceeds and upon which objects participate in being. In other words, since God exists forever, nothing else can come to be without God's will or thought, and since there can't even be a potential for any being without God's thought, all potentialities for being arise in the "mind of God" than in that sense God is actually "Being Itself." I think "Ground of Being" is a less confusing term. God is the ground upon which all being is based and from which all being proceeds.

### How Can "a Being" be Being Itself?

Part of the confusion stems from a misunderstanding of what is being said. I say that God is 'necessary being' not "a necessary being," not because I forgot the "a" but because God is not

"a being." He is above the level of any particular being that participates in being, but exists on the level of the Being, the thing itself, apart from any particular beings. There is Being, and there is "the beings." This is a crucial distinction, but it leaves one wondering what it means and how it could be. I think the answer lies in the fact that God is ultimate reality. God is the first, and highest and only necessary thing that exists, and thus, had God not created, God would be the only thing that exists. Could one somehow ponder a universe in which God had not created, in which God was all that was, one might well ask "what is it to be in this universe where there is only God?" In such a universe the only conceivable answer is "to be is to be God." In that sense God is Being Itself.

### Concerning God as the Ground of Being

The following from John A T Robinson, Bishop of Woolwich, 'Honest To God' (SCM, London: 1963)

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For in place of a God who is literally or physically 'up there' we have accepted, as part of our mental furniture, a God who is spiritually or metaphysically 'out there'. p. 13 [Robinson argues against this theistic concept.]

After it had been discredited scientifically, it continued to serve theologially as an acceptable frame of reference. p. 16

But suppose such a super-Being 'out there' is really only a sophisticated version of the Old Man in the sky? Suppose belief in God does not, indeed cannot, mean being persuaded of the 'existence' of some entity, even a supreme entity, even a superior entity, which might or might not be there, like life on Mars? p. 17

God, [Paul] Tillich was saying, is not a projection 'out there', an Other beyond the skies, of whose existence we have to convince ourselves, but the Ground of our very Being. pp. 22

... the impact of the now famous passages about 'Christianity without religion' in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Letters and Papers From Prison ... the church was not yet ready for what Bonhoeffer was giving us as his last will and testimony. pp 22-23

Rudolph Bultmann ... 'New testament and Mythology' ... when he spoke of the 'mythological element in the New Testament he was really referring to all the language which seeks to characterise the Gospel history as more than bare history like any other history. ... unintelligible jargon ... the mythological language of pre-existence, incarnation, ascent and descent, miraculous intervention, cosmic catastrophe, and so on ... make sense only on a now completely antiquated world view. ... the entire conception of a supernatural order which invades and 'perforates' this one must be abandoned. But if so, what do we mean by God ... and what becomes of Christianity? p. 24

God is, by definition, ultimate reality. And one cannot argue whether ultimate reality really exists. One can only ask what ultimate reality is like ... Thus, the fundamental theological question is not in establishing the 'existence' of God as a separate entity but in pressing through in ultimate concern to what Tillich calls 'the ground of our being'.. p. 29

In Tillich's words: The phrase *deus sive natura*, used by people like Scotus Erigena and Spinoza, does not say that God is identical with nature but that he is identical with the *natura naturans*, the creative nature, the creative ground of all natural objects. p. 31

God is not 'out there'. He is in Bonhoeffer's words 'the "beyond" in the midst of our life', a depth of reality reached 'not on the borders of life but at its centre', not by any flight of the alone to the alone, but, in Kierkegaard's fine phrase, by 'a deeper immersion in existence'. For the word 'God' denotes the ultimate depth of all our being, the creative ground and meaning of all our existence. ...Tillich warns us that to make the necessary transposition, 'you must forget everything traditional that you have learned about God, perhaps even that word itself.' p. 47

Belief in God is the trust, the well nigh incredible trust, that to give ourselves to the uttermost in love is not to be confounded but to be 'accepted', that Love is the ground of our being, to which we ultimately 'come home'. ... And the specifically Christian view of the world is asserting that the final definition of this reality, from which 'nothing can separate us', since it is the very ground of our being, is 'the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord'. p. 49

... Bonhoeffer insists ... 'The transcendent is not infinitely remote but close at hand.' p.53

The question of God is the question whether this depth of being is a reality or an illusion, not whether a Being exists beyond the bright, blue sky, or anywhere else. Belief in God is a matter of 'what you take seriously without any reservation', of what for you is ultimate reality. p. 55

The New Testament says that Jesus was the Word of God, it says that God was in Christ, it says that Jesus is the Son of God; but it does not say that Jesus was God, simply like that. p. 70

Bonhoeffer .. [wrote] ... To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way, to cultivate some particular form of asceticism (as a sinner, penitent or a saint), but to be a man. It is not some religious act which makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world.' pp. 82-83

... asked by the crowds of Jesus when he began his public ministry: 'What is this new teaching?' And so it has always been.. Paul was dismissed as a setter forth of strange gods, Socrates was condemned as an 'atheist'. Every new religious truth comes as a destroyer of some other god, as an attack upon that which men hold most sacred. p. 125

... the beginning is to try to be honest - and to go on from there. p. 141

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