

# Religion and Culture by Paul Tillich

A digital edition of Paul Tillich's Lecture "Religion and Culture"  
Harvard University, 1955-56

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Lecture II – Thurs., Sept. 29, 1955

I suppose that some of you didn't make it last Thursday, so for their benefit I want to repeat some of the technical arrangements of these lectures. ... I want to review briefly the main line of thought of the first lecture.

I said that the two subjects, religion and culture, are very large ones and must be limited to those points in which all the different cultural functions become religiously relevant. In order to make this understandable, we have to discuss first the meaning of culture, and then the meaning of religion, and on this basis, relate them to each other during the lectures of this and the next semester. By the way, this brings me to another technical problem. I have been asked whether it is possible to take this [course] only for one semester, either for this or the next semester. I believe there is no difficulty of doing so because this semester will mainly deal with a special group of cultural functions, in contrast to those with which we will deal next semester.

The organization of the lectures is identical with the organization of culture. Perhaps you remember that I defined culture as the creative encounter between a subject and its object, in which something is produced which has the power of independent being – which has an independent power of being. Now to this I got a typed question, and I think a very good example. Please don't hesitate to do that, from lecture to lecture – or, if you are very courageous ... raise your finger ... (which really should not take much courage!) ...

*Discussion with students:*

*Question:* When you explained that creativity is involved whenever you have an object capable of existing in an independent way, what did you mean by "capable of existing in an independent way"?

*Answer (Paul Tillich):* Now this is a very good and certainly a very necessary question. The idea was the following. If we have the subject (who is a poet, let us say), and have the English language (which is the material object this poet encounters), then in a cultural creativity he is able to make, out of this object, something new which is neither he alone nor the English language alone, but is something new created out of the encounter between him as subject, and the English language as object. And this encounter produces a poem. Now all of you have made poems, in their life, but not all of these poems have the power-of-being! [laughter] and a cultural creation in the realm of poetry is a poem [which has a power-of-being independently of the act of creation, which has an impact on other

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people which can be acknowledged, at least sometimes, by the community of those who are under its impact. That is what I meant when I spoke of the power-of-independent-being.

Take another example from the practical realm, e.g., a political movement. Many political movements are going on in [our] time – the witness to this is my wastepaper basket! – These political movements, which are immediately thrown into this most important tool of existence [laughter], have no independent power-of-being, they don't reach the state of independent cultural realities. But sometimes it happens that out of such a movement, something comes out which changes the surface of the earth, as for instance the Nazi movement, the Communist movement, and, in earlier periods, the democratic movement.

Now this is, then, a cultural reality which has the power of independent existence, born out of the chaotic social situation on the one hand, and a creative political subject on the other hand. Out of this kind of encounters, all culture is created. That is what I meant and I hope this answered the question.

I said that the first and most important and all-permeating cultural creation is language, because language has the power of liberating man from the bondage to the given in time and space. He can transcend it, he can produce abstractions, universals, and language lives in universals and their connections. Nothing is more astonishing than this power of the human mind to see and to create universals. This power is language. And therefore I said the first section of our lectures, with which we shall start next week, will be the problem: "Religion and Language."

I come now to the activity of man towards reality in his encounter with it, which we can call the transformation of reality, the transforming or technical function of the human mind. Language makes it possible that man produces tools. There are very interesting experiments about the way in which animals, especially higher apes, use tools. If you take their food away from them, and give them a stick, they use the stick to get the food. But they don't produce a tool as a tool, and here the most important word is the word "as." Man produces tools as tools, and therefore he has been defined, rightly – at least in *one* of his functions – as homo faber, "he who fabricates," the man who is able to fabricate tools, and [with these tools, other tools; and with other tools, means of consumption. [10] The "as" character is what is made possible through human language. Only because man is able to say "hammer" or "pot" or "cup" or "wheel," or any other of the primitive tools, and makes a thing which always has this character, which has become a universal, which has "as" character – tool as tool, hammer as hammer – man is different from all other living beings and produces a whole new world out of the given world, transforming the given reality into technical creations.

Now the immensity of this possibility is visible to the man of the 20th century more than to any other man in all history. But even [in] the most primitive man who made the first tool – perhaps a knife, in order to cut – the principal character of man, this fundamental function of his culture, was present, and the most complicated artificial brain of today is only a logical continuation of this fundamental power of the human mind to produce tools. And don't forget what I said, that this is possible only because man has the power of universals, is free from the given, has language. Technical functions are dependent – as are all other functions – on language. This refers to all realms of reality. I gave, for the technical or transforming function, examples only out of physical techniques, but there are also biological, psychological, sociological techniques – biological in growing plants and animals (as in agriculture, gardening, growing animals); or medicine,

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the techniques of growing in *spite* of interferences from other forces from outside, or disturbances from inside. The technical function is all-pervasive. Even this lecture has a technical side, without which it would not be possible. This refers also to economies, to politics, to education. This whole great realm has been often too much neglected by not only theologians but also [philosophers?] and has been treated as something of minor importance. But we cannot do that any more; the revenge of the technical realm was that it swallowed all the others, including religion. We will see this when I deal with the present situation.

Generally speaking one can say: the technical function of human culture is the function in which means are used for intended ends. So we have now two [?] functions, which we have to confront with religion. In the technical function, in all transformation of reality for an end – that’s technique – there is something implied. It is presupposed, and on the other hand enhances the technical function, namely the function of cognitive perception. And this is the third one, to which I refer. Now notice here one methodological point. I don’t start with the theoretical or cognitive function, but with language and the technical function. The reasons for this is that man is not first of all somebody who *looks* at reality, who contemplates reality, and then makes signs out of it, but man is first of all a being who uses tools for ends. The technical function is, so to speak, metaphysically older than the theoretical or cognitive function. Therefore the existentialist philosopher Heidegger has rightly emphasized that man meets reality first in terms of tools, of things *for something*, but not as objects of contemplation. [11]

But of course, the moment in which you make tools, you must have the participation of the material which you deal with, and of the ends which you want to reach. And so, the cognitive element develops. Here we come to the cognitive function (or, in a more larger sense, participative function) of human culture. In order to use reality, we must discover the behavior of reality. So the cognitive function is connected with the technical, and both together are always at work, as we know it from our own experience. They are partly dependent and partly independent of each other. The greatest advances in technical power have been made by pure cognition, by pure theory, and it is a right complaint of many educators in this country, in the technical sciences, that one goes much too quickly to the applied science before developing, independently, without asking the question, “For what?,” pure scientific knowledge. This is another function which we must keep clear, in spite of the pragmatic interdependence with techniques. This function is based on the eros, the love, towards knowing, even if it is not connected with practical purposes. So in spite of my emphasis on techniques, I must also emphasize the comparative independence of the will-to-knowledge from any special application of this knowledge. And those of you who in some way or other have to do with technical things, in any realm – not only physical techniques but also psychological and biological – don’t forget what I said today, namely that the more science works first of all independent[ly], driven by pure eros, in the Platonic sense – by the pure love of knowledge – the more it can be applied later on to technical purposes. But if from the very beginning ... it asks “How can that be used?” – which means, in a deteriorized form, “How can the factory make money out of it?” – then never a great discovery will happen.

There are realms of cognition which are completely independent of technical application,[12] namely historical knowledge, based on natural human curiosity to hear stories how it really has been – without *any* purpose. The people who gathered in public places in Greece to hear the ethical stories of Homer didn’t want to use them for any special purpose, but they had a happy life when they listened to these internal voices [forces?]. All of

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historical science is based on the same passion, to know how it really has been, to know the story of the past.

Finally, the knowledge of philosophy, which includes the question: “How is the structure of being-itself?” – not any special being, not even human being, but being-itself universally. This is the greatest of all curiosities and it is a curiosity which is so fundamental for the human mind that in every primitive myth, the philosophical question is present, expressed in a poetic-intuitive way, united with conceptual elements. Only later do the conceptual elements become independent. But again I would say: every true philosopher is driven by the eros, by the love, to know what that being in which he finds himself, really is. He wants to know ultimate reality, and a philosophy which does not have this eros any more, which is self-sufficient in dealing with the logical presuppositions of science alone, is not driven by the philosophical eros. It may be driven by special scientific eros – I don’t mind this, and I don’t deny it – but philosophy as philosophy wants to *know* what the reality is in which we are living.

Now this is the third function – again dependent on language, on universals – the perceptive or cognitive function of human culture. And as you can imagine, this will be a very central problem for our discussion of religion and culture. We have to deal with religion and science, with religion and historical research, with religion and depth psychology, with religion and philosophy.

I come now to the fourth function of human culture, based on the encounter with reality, a function which arises as early as the production of tools, and somehow earlier as independent cognition, as the will to know – namely, the aesthetic intuition of reality. This aesthetic intuition creates the artistic forms – first of all in language, or at the same time, usually, in sounds. The first we call poetry, the second music ... , the third visual arts; or in movements (dance or theater). In all these functions, the intuition of reality expresses itself, and therefore in contrast to the transforming and to the perceiving functions of man’s cultural life, I call this the expressive function of man’s cultural life: the aesthetic function [is the expressive function. It expresses the two sides of the encounter of subject and object, of the cultural creativity. For example a painting: it expresses the life power of the encountered reality. For instance, if a tree is painted, the inner life power of this astonishing reality which we call a tree; not astonishing for our daily life, but astonishing for the artistic view, which not only the artist but every human being has sometimes, when he looks at the greatness and the miraculous character of a tree. This is expressed in a great painting. It is different from the cognitive perception, which describes scientifically the relations this tree has to its own causes, to its surroundings, to its effects, etc. It sees something else, it sees the power-of-being in a tree, and therefore it doesn’t need to be naturalistic or photographical: it *expresses*. And therefore in some way all great art is “expressionistic,” although this word has been used for a special style. [13]

On the other hand the other side of expression is the way in which the artistic mind *receives* this life power. And not everybody receives this in the same way. Nobody does. And all the great artistic styles and their individual representatives express their reception of the life power of reality in a different way, according to their special style. We can make this duality of expression (expressing the object – its life power; and expressing the subject – its receptive power) in dividing the arts. Perhaps of all the arts the visual arts express most adequately the life power of things, while music expresses *also* life power, but more predominantly the subjective element. But there is no alternative – either subjective or objective – both are always present, but the emphasis is always different.

Artistic, aesthetic elements – elements of expressive power – are present in all other

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functions, *in* all language. Therefore the early language is often at least as poetic, as scientific, and as technical. It has all three elements in itself. And even the creation of *good* tools is an artistic creation besides being a technical one. So these three functions permeate each other. And this is especially true of the historical vision of reality and the philosophical perception of it. Every historian is in some way an artist, and a philosopher without artistic intuition is not a philosopher – a craftsman perhaps, but not more than this.

On the other hand – and this is an important statement which is much discussed –, there are cognitive elements in every artistic creation. Artistic creations reveal levels of reality. Take a novel: the classical novels, e.g., Dostoevsky, have revealed more of the psychological nature than perhaps any academic psychologist ever did. It is interesting to see how today [the psychoanalytic and generally depth-psychological consideration of man confirms the perceptions of the great artists, poets and novelists. These functions are what we want to deal with this first semester. [14]

I now come back to language. Language has two functions. Up to now I only dealt with one function: the designating. It designates universal. But language always has another function at the same time: communication. These two functions are equally fundamental and are interdependent. The emphasis in techniques, in science, and even in art was on the designative function of language. In the other group of cultural functions the emphasis is on the communicative function. This leads to the first function of the second group, namely the function of social exchange, with which we must start next semester's lectures—of course always under the point of view of their relationship to religion.

The function of social exchange has many forms: economic exchange (usually called trading); intellectual exchange (teaching, discussing, receiving); the transforming exchange (using technical elements, as in medicine and education); the spiritual exchange (communication of meanings); and most important, the personal exchange (what we usually call love, in all its different forms). Now all this belongs to what I call social exchange. And religion in relation to social exchange (or social community, if you prefer this phrase) is the fifth cultural function, the first in the second large group. But social exchange presupposes the existence of a society of persons. This leads to the next function, the function of the law.

Social exchange goes on under the law, under a legal structure of all social relations. The importance of this doesn't need to be emphasized in Harvard University and its famous Law School. But sometimes it is good that the Law School is related to philosophy and theology, and that the function of the law (besides its organization of social exchange for man's *whole* culture, and for his ultimate concern, namely religion) is discussed. And that is what we shall do.

The law is also as genuine as language, and is also older than developed science. When I use the word "law" I want to remind you of the fact that this word is used today in two very different ways: on the one hand, the social law, which organizes [society and on the other hand, natural law. Again natural law is used in two ways: as physical law, and law for morals. What is the original meaning of the law? Certainly not physical laws – which is much later and is an application of the experience of the social law, which existed in the moment in which two human beings lived together, to physics. It is transferred by analogy to the physical realm. This analogy expresses itself still in the fact that the term has great insecurities and fallacies in itself. One hundred years ago the natural law was replacing the God of former centuries. Today the natural law, in the sense of physical laws (the laws according to which nature moves) has become one of the most questionable [15]

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concepts in physics itself. And this is so because analogies never are completely valid.

In any case the legal realm is fundamental and original, and one of those cultural functions which are of course possible only through language – every law is expressed in language, and the earliest writings we have on the stone tablets of the past are legal formulas.

But the law itself has an element within it which carries the same name: natural law in the sense of rational law. This name means that there is something underlying all law, namely the principle of justice. The question always is: according to which norms can laws be given? As you know (we will discuss it much fuller), there is a tendency to the merely positive law in the Anglo Saxon philosophy of law. In other nations, especially France, the rational law prevails over against the positive law. In any case, there are underlying principles of justice in every law, and this leads me to the next function, namely to the norm-giving, or the ethical function.

The seventh function of culture – the experience of the norm – happens in the encounter with the other person. This also is an ever-present reality. There, discovery is the experience of meeting the other one, who also is a person. I will deal with this very fully because this is one of the profoundest insights of modern philosophy, namely that there is no person, no ego, which is not encountering a “thou,” another one. Only the other ego limits us and throws us back to ourselves and demands unconditionally the acceptance of the other person as a person. There is no person in isolation. “Person” arises only in the encounter with another person. They become persons in this encounter. There is a phenomenon – which I like to call “resistance” – which makes the person possible. [16] Imagine for a moment if you were alone in the world, you could swallow the whole world into yourself without resistance, except that resistance which can be overcome technically. But there is the other person, and in the moment in which you encounter him, you cannot go on, you cannot swallow it – of course you can do it, you can make the other person into a piece of nature. But then you destroy yourself, because in the other person is an unconditional demand to accept him as another person. Everything unconditional is first experienced in the ego-thou encounter, in the encounter of person with person. We call this the realm of morals, and its theory: ethics.

The eighth function: social exchange, law and ethical reality, are existing not in the air, but in a powerful reality, in a community which has the power to be. We can call this community “state,” but this is a very late word, of the 17th and 18th centuries. We can call it with the Greeks, *polis*,<sup>1</sup> namely the community which has the power to be and to act. Whether we call it this way or that way, it is also an ever-present reality of every culture. In the most primitive patriarchal society (as we read about it in the stories of the Patriarchs of the Old Testament), we have a state-like function – we have law, the power of action, a centered reality. Therefore the highest concepts of philosophers and theologians are derived directly or symbolically from this all-embracing cultural reality. Plato’s *politeia*<sup>1</sup> is his philosophy of *all* culture, including education, science, music, and everything. Augustine’s *De civitatis Dei et terrenae* (“the society of God and of the earth”) are the symbols he uses for the fulfilment, and for the demonic opposition against the fulfilment. The kingdom of God in the Old and New Testament is a political symbol applied to the universe. This means: the last and most embracing of cultural functions is the political one – it embraces everything.

Now I am at the end of the organization of the lectures. The last four subjects will be discussed next semester, the first four in the first. And there is no religion in my

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<sup>1</sup>Plato, *Politeia* ...

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enumeration, and I will tell you next Tuesday why.== (1) Cf. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, ed. Gerhard Friedrich. Vol. VI. pp. 525ff. – Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub'g Co., Grand Rapids, 1968. – (Ed.)