

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 IV – Oct. 11, 1955 [Suggested Reading List – collected by Prof. Leibrecht ... [26]
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T.S. Eliot, Notes toward the Definition of Culture

C. Cochrane, Christianity and Culture

E. Brunner, Christianity and Civilization

F. Schleiermacher, Speeches on Religion ...

M.C. D'Arcy, Nature of Belief

R. Kroner, The Primacy of Faith

Ogden & Richards, The Meaning of Meaning

E. Cassirer, Language and Myth

Oppenheimer, Science and the Common Understanding

M.R. Cohen, Reason and Nature

C. Raven, Science and Christian Man

K. Heim, Christian Faith and Natural Science

F. Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy

I. Edman, Arts and the Man

E. Brunner, Justice and the Social Order

E. Brunner, Law and Order

E. Fromm, Psychoanalysis and Religion

D. Roberts, Psychotherapy and the Christian View of Man

R. Niebuhr, Christianity and Power Politics

J. Bennett, Christianity and Communism

E. Heimann, Freedom and Order

(Cont.)

J.H. Randall, Making of the Modern Mind

G. Marcel, Being and Having

J. Wild, Challenge of Existentialism

M. Buber, I and Thou

P. Tillich, Love, Power, and Justice

Ortega, Revolt of the Masses

| [27]
Last Saturday there was a discussion with you and Mr. Leibrecht, and some very interesting questions were raised. I want to read them, but I will answer only one, because they will be answered later.

Discussion with students:

Question: Is not the nature of Biblical revelation opposed to philosophy? Has not Karl Barth shown that a synthesis between Christianity and culture, Christianity and humanism, is [not possible]?

Answer (Paul Tillich): The answer to this cannot be given in one word. In any case, the formulation I gave to this problem shows that it is not a matter of synthesis but a matter of mutual immanence, of being-within-each-other – for instance, the fact (to which we will refer very soon) that even Karl Barth has to use a language, which has developed in terms of a culture two thousands of years. But this is a very preliminary answer, and to this first part of the question, “Is revelation opposed to philosophy?” – I must do what I don’t like to do, but I must do it: Please read a very small book of only 80 and some pages, by myself, which has arisen just on the basis of thousands of such questions, namely Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality, from the Chicago University Press. There I try to answer this question more fully.

Question: If we interpret religion in ontological terms – for instance, the participation of our being in absolute Being – can we still speak of God as our Creator, and the Creator of the world?

Answer (Paul Tillich): Now this is the next subject, namely the problem of symbols, and there I will answer this in discussing the meaning and the significance of symbolic language.

Question: Is the aesthetic intuition of reality the function of human culture? Is this intuition a form of revelation?

Answer (Paul Tillich): This again I must postpone – this will be the problem of the two ways of looking at a painting – until we come to the section on Religion and the Arts.

Question: What is the criterion of a true ultimate concern? The answer [was “self-sacrifice.” What does this mean? If it is merely self-sacrifice of the believer, many idolatries demand that. [28]

Answer (Paul Tillich): Now that is certainly true, and I am very grateful for this question especially, because we had a very quick conclusion of the last lecture, in which I pointed to the criterion, to the anti-idolatric criterion, of faith. I said this anti-idolatric criterion is self-sacrifice. Now obviously this has been misunderstood as the self-sacrifice of an individual – for instance a martyr, or a prophet, or the Christ himself. That was not meant. Self-sacrifice was meant as the sacrifice of the *finite bearer* of that which is infinite, in the finitude of what he represents: in his language, in his religious tradition, in his obedience to the law, in his piety, and all this. My idea was *not* that the religious “genius” – or however we use that word (“genius” is not too good) – must sacrifice himself, in terms of giving his life. This belongs to another level of problems. And we can say, Yes, this is very often the case, but this is not the answer because (as the question rightly says), *many* idolatries, e.g., Nazism, Communism, and many others, have a tremendous amount of martyrs. So this is not the answer. The answer is that everything finite which, as finite, claims ultimacy, must acknowledge that it is not the ultimate itself. And only on this basis do we have what I would call the ultimate criterion.

Now I believe that, after two weeks, four lectures, having first discussed the different functions of culture on the basis of a consideration of man and culture, and the meaning of faith in its double sense (as ultimate concern and as acceptance of special expressions of this ultimate concern), you all desire that we now go directly into the concrete problems of our lecture[s], namely the relation of religion and the different functions of human culture – or, if you prefer the phrase, of the human mind.

You remember that at the very beginning I spoke intensively – and somewhat ecstatically – about the meaning of language, language as the expression of human freedom, as the possibility of using universals and, by using them, transcending any given situation – language, at the same time not only designating reality but also communicating reality, in the life of a community. From this we derived the two main groups of cultural [functions, [29] those which receive reality and those which transform it.

This fundamental substance of language leads me now to start with a discussion of the relationship of religion to language. Whenever I use the term “religion,” please don’t forget the fundamental definition: a state of being ultimately concerned, and, on the other hand, the acceptance of concrete expressions of this concern. The one is the larger concept of religion, the other the traditional concept. We must deal with both of them but we cannot understand the relation of religion and culture without continuously referring to both of these concepts. I believe that many of the misunderstandings, some of which also came out in the questions I just read to you – Karl Barth, and other people – are based on the fact that the two meanings of religion are not clearly distinguished. When I gave these first four lectures and discussed the meaning of religion, I tried to avoid religious language, while pointing to the meaning of religion. This was not completely possible because the word “faith” *is* a genuinely religious concept, but when using it I translated it into concepts which are taken from another language, which we may call philosophical language, or ordinary or simply descriptive language – however you want to call it. Many difficulties, especially those found in theology, are rooted in this situation. That is a little of my answer to the first question I read about philosophy and theology. When we *speak* about the meaning of the religious symbols, then we cannot simply repeat them, but we must interpret them. And interpretive concepts are, in the larger sense of the word, philosophical concepts.

According to the double meaning of “religion,” we have to discuss two different questions, when speaking about the relation of religion and language. First, the presence of

ultimate concern *in language as language*, the presence of an ultimate concern in language as language. This is the first question.

The second is: the nature of the religious language in contrast to other forms of language.

These are the two considerations, and they already indicate what we must do in all our lectures in considering any of the functions of human culture. We must always ask the question of the hidden ultimate concern behind a cultural function, and we must also ask [about] the importance of religion to this function, in their mutual interdependence. [So the whole lecture [course] is based on this duality of the meaning of religion, and therefore these lectures of the last week were the real fundamental ones, and they would demand in principle a whole lecture-course. But since this cannot be done, I promise you to come back to them from this hour to the last hour next semester, again and again, because this is really the foundation of an understanding of the relation of religion and culture.= [30]

Last time I gave you the determining proposition about the relation of religion and culture, namely that religion is the substance of culture and that, as such, culture is the form of religion. When we say this, it means that religion also must be the substance of language, and language a form of religion.

The meaning of the first half of this assertion, namely that religion is the substance of culture, is dependent on an understanding of language generally. It is dependent on the assertion which I want to make and argue for, namely that all language is based on an encounter of mind and reality. Language is the result of an encounter of mind and reality. The words and structures of a language are abstractions from this encounter.

If this is true, then it is obvious that the basic encounter in which a language is created, has a special significance and a special power because, here, original creation is going on. This is the reason why the philologists – I always feel that at least one section of my being is a philological one – that every philologist (he who loves the logos, the word – that is what “philo-logy” means) tries to trace words back to the place of their birth. Sometimes this can lead into absurdities, because words have their history, and you cannot simply go back and say, “From now on this word shall mean again what it did before.” On the other hand, if you go back to the creative sources in which a group of men encountered reality in an original and fresh way, then you get a lot of insights into the language of today. Therefore, one should not despise philology, and that means: going back into the history of language, to the genuine meanings. Neither philosophers nor theologians nor educators should despise this philological task.

It is an interesting and somehow distressing observation that original languages, [much richer in their expressive power than modern languages – that the deterioration of language takes place which is often counterbalanced by a development of new languages out of the slang section of the deteriorized language. Now this is partly the case with English, and I think the slang-section is developed much stronger in this country than in England and the other English-using languages. And it is probably possible that out of this encounter with reality, which is going on in the American popular mind, a new primitivism of language will arise in which much of the deterioration of the official language has been overcome. [31]

The symptoms of the deterioration of a language, the loss of the original encounter with reality, is, for instance (one of them) the abbreviations. And here today we are in a period of utter deterioration. We replace full words by abbreviation, combined by letters without meaning. We do not say “General Motors” (in which there is still something of

the original idea of moving powers, universally, combined in this enterprise), but we say “G.M.”, which doesn’t mean anything. And we do not say “Union Theological Seminary” (although I have never followed this usage), but we say “U.T.S.”, and that means all the meanings connected with these words: that it is a “sem“inary, a place where “seeds” are thrown into the spiritual earth; that it is “theological”; that it is the “union” of all denominations (which means very much, symbolically) – is gone. “U.T.S.” is nothing! And even a word like “United Nations” ... one says “U.N.” and the meaning is gone!

This is one of the symptoms of the deterioration of language, for a very special reason: language has lost its expressive power, in these cases, and has been used simply as a sign, in social relations, for communicative powers in a technical society, where nothing more than these abbreviations is needed. But when we speak of spiritual deterioration, we should not forget that this is one of the symptoms.

There is another, which took place much earlier. In early languages, e.g., genuine [i.e., classical – ed.] Greek, the grammatical inflections are incredibly rich – to the distress of all students who must learn these languages! But slowly, many of these inflections disappear, and a great poverty takes place with respect to them, but this stage of poverty is sufficient to fulfill the communicative function of language in a technical society. Tenses, optatives, conjunctions, and all this, are not needed any more. |(I will speak briefly later about [32] the extreme of this development in what we call logical positivism; but this demands a special consideration.)

This deterioration also has a social side. Creative language, which always comes up again, by poetry, and out of the underground of the slang-creation, is used for advertising. The still-existing great words are used for often the lowest forms of advertisement. You can read in advertisements words like joy, courage, bliss, life, happiness, love, hope, beauty, truth, etc. In each of these words, there was an original encounter between reality and the human mind. In their formation there was ultimate concern, and it still sounds to us through them, and the poets and writers often save this sound for us. But, in spite of this, they are used for very preliminary non-ultimate concerns, namely profit or pleasure.

I myself am so insistent on this point because I have experienced another, socially conditioned, deterioration of language, the deterioration of the German language under dictatorship. This is the case because the dictators of our period of history are the greatest advertisers. They can stay alive only on the basis of a continuous, 24-hour [daily] advertisement of their own ... And this is in complete correlation to what happens under dictatorships, namely dehumanization. This word (formed by Hegel and Marx) fits the dictatorships (even that dictatorship which uses the name of Marx for itself) more than any other word, any other period. People become objects, things, pieces of utilities, to be used. Psychologically, under the impact of this advertisement and the power behind it, they lose their creative personal center. They are dissolved into pieces. The extreme of this is the dehumanization intentionally going on in institutions like concentration camps. But the *whole* nation is under this pressure. And if man is not able to speak any more in terms of his free subjectivity, if he becomes a piece of the world of objects and only objects, then he also loses his language. He accepts the language of the dictators, which is a completely corrupted language. And the danger of course is that even in democracy, something like this goes on not in terms of external power, but of psychological pressure, from the school period on, to the end of your lives, in which you hear the last radio-memory which is given to you by others. And even worse than all this, the slogans of public |communication, which use great words and deteriorize them. [33]

Now I feel these things as blasphemy against something which has divine roots, namely the human possibility of encountering one's reality, including oneself, and expressing this in words in which ultimate concern is implied; and the use of this kind of creation for purposes in which the creativity is gone and the words are used, not in their power but in only one element of their meaning.

I said that there is much protest going on against all this by the poets and writers insofar as they are artistic. Prose or poetry, novel or drama, it is all the same: there we have the protest – the tremendous function about which I will speak more later – to try to save man's encounter with reality, and the expression of it in language, from this complete deterioration and destruction. But the demonic situation – “demonic” meaning structures of destruction, against which one cannot resist so well – this situation (that the new words, used perhaps by a poet in order to open up a new level of reality which could not be seen or heard any more, because everything was abused), that this is then used just for that thing against which they are fighting: for advertising and the propagandist use of their language. So words which are newly born and are still [innocent(?)], become sick ... This is the tragedy of language.

As I said, creative language is born out of encounter with reality. Therefore the original creation of language shows different forms of ultimate concern in basic characteristics of the different languages. And I will give you a few examples for this.

It was always astonishing for me that the Greek language, *before* the philosophers came into the picture, produced the concept $\epsilon\iota\varsigma$, that which is being (meaning “things”), that which is, that which has, being. Even today it is difficult to communicate the meaning of these two Greek words, $\epsilon\iota\varsigma$ (“the,” “beings”); but the Greek language produced these two words even before the philosophers used them to enter, through this door opened by the Greek language, into the fundamental problems of philosophy, namely the problems of being and non-being. In this way, one can say the greatest philosophy in Greece was the Greek language. Greek philosophy was created *potentially* in the moment in which the Greek language created words like “ta onta,” or “eidos” (“idea”), later used by Plato.

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It is quite different with the Roman language. If you want to say something with great precision, then you use Latin, the language of that nation whose concern was the law, the law between man and man. The Roman language is characterized by the creation of the law in terms of preciseness of saying – in a way which cannot be surpassed, and never was reached, by any other language – the fundamental principles of human relations in terms of the law. The Romans considered their law as that which was guaranteed by their gods, as that for which they made their empire, as that to which they subjected all nations of the world. It is not so simple as the anti-imperialists say, as if the Romans wanted to conquer the whole world – such a thing never happens, even if the opposite group always calls it so, in propagandistic terms. But the reason is always something very similar to what happened in this country when, in the last half-century, it became an imperial power, not for the sake of conquering other nations, but driven by the belief in the right of the democratic idea. Without the sanctity of the law in the unconscious of the whole Roman nation, without the language in which this is expressed, no Roman empire would ever have been created. And it is important to know – we will come to it later – that the Christian Church took many elements of the Roman law into its own canon law.

Or let me speak of the German language, which is my own. I didn't know much about it till I came to this country 22 years ago – I was already rather old – then noticed

something about the German language, namely that it is based on the mysticism of the Middle Ages. This is empirically true, and is true in its very essence. The language of Meister Eckhart and of the great mystics of the Middle Ages was translated into German, and out of this the German philosophical and, partly, theological language was born and entered the general popular language of the Germans. And whenever you hear my lectures don't forget that my encounter with reality is largely influenced by the German encounter with reality, which usually is called mystical. Now of course if I use the word "mystical" here, and very often later on, it is never used in the sense of "absurd," or "nonsense," as sometimes used today. It means what it says, in Greek, namely the presence of the mystery in the depth of reality, the mystery of our being, of our existence, and the *experience* of this mysterious depth of being. |

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Now in this sense the German language was able to express, in *its* philosophy and poetry, *this* encounter with reality which is quite different from other languages, perhaps nearest to the Greek.

And then the French language: without the French language, no Descartes and no modern philosophy. It is the clarity of the French language, its rationality, and the endeavor of the French mind to purify this language again and again intentionally, which has produced this miracle of the French language in its combination of beauty and rationality. This of course represents what France considers *its* ultimate concern, namely this kind of culture which combines beauty and clarity.

And then the English language: one of the characteristics of it, in contrast for instance to the German, is the predominance of the verb. This predominance expresses again an ultimate concern, namely the English-American activism, the dynamic character of these nations, and of course most intensively, of America. The predominance of the noun, of the substantive, in German has something static, something fixed. When I spoke about the relation of the Second Person of the Trinity to the Holy Spirit, my German students usually didn't ask, "Now what shall we do about it? What is the practical consequence of this?," but they tried to find out whether this has sense or not in itself. Here immediately the question of the verb is asked, namely the question of the action. This again is a justified ultimate concern, and brought about so many consequences in the world-historical activities of these two nations.

Enough examples. Others of you who know other languages may add to this consideration from their knowledge. In any case, in each of these languages an attitude of ultimate concern, in the encounter of this human group with reality, is manifest. I don't mind that someone comes and says, after this climatic and agricultural and economic and other conditions, "Who would doubt that everything that happens in the human mind has these conditions?" But that does not deny the reality of the meaning itself. No historical genesis can deny or even attack a meaning which is always valid in itself, and has to be criticized in itself, and not from the very tortuous way in which, out of the living matter on earth, such a thing as Shakespeare's drama finally develops. |

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Now a last consideration. Language has two sides: meaning and power – as everything in man's spiritual life [does]. The very definition of man's creative spirit, is: the unity of meaning and power. Some mystical [?] expressions are completely, or rather almost completely, determined by meaning without power; others are determined almost completely by power without meaning. The two extremes are the mathematical sign, which is completely defined in its meaning by the decision which makes up the definition of this mathematical sign; and on the other hand a liturgical language, which is not understandable to the present generation, especially if it is given in a foreign language. There,

only the sound as such is important, and the power expressed in this sound. Now my main criticism of logical positivism (I have others, too) is that it tries to reduce language to meaning, and to remove the element of power. In mathematical abstraction, this is certainly possible, but otherwise it takes away one decisive element of language. The power of a word is based on its connotations – traditional connotation and personally experienced connotation. The power of a sentence is dependent on the images produced by special words in it. The power of speech is dependent on the constellation of images *produced by* the speech, and on the rhythm, the musical element, in it.

Now these sides of language are not unessential, emotional additions, but they all witness to the encounter with reality which has produced them, and where they are mediators to us of the same encounter – or of a similar one, because it is never absolutely the same. If you see this, then you can understand a lot about the manifoldness of human language.

I would say one of the consequences of this polarity of meaning and power in all language is that we can find an answer to the question whether philosophy is possible or not. It is not by chance but very consistent that some of the logical positivists have rejected the whole history of philosophy – except the beginnings of logical positivism in the “Vienna Circle” a few decades ago – because philosophy, all classical philosophy, through the whole history of mankind, has terms in which meaning and power are united, and if you take away the element of power, then these words are (as some logical positivists tell us) meaningless, or they have an emotional meaning. But they have not [only an emotional meaning, they grasp levels of reality which can never be grasped by mathematical or quasi-mathematical signs. This means that we should not be afraid, in this respect, if we affirm the truth-value of the genuinely created languages in the whole history of mankind. [37]