

Religion and Culture by Paul Tillich

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The next realm we must discuss is the relationship of religion and the technical realm. The first part will deal with the logical structure of the technical realm, and then we will discuss its relationship to the religious problem. Now the first thing I have to justify is that this is the second cultural function after language: technology. This is important in relation to science, to which we will come after having discussed the technical realm.

The world is not a totality of observed objects, but the world is a totality of usable tools – this is an important insight, that man (and not only man, but all living beings) has first of all a relationship to reality which has the character of tool, of means and ends, of using and not of contemplating. The tool-character of things precedes, in pragmatic dignity and in developmental priority, its object-character. This is especially emphasized by the philosopher Heidegger and is a very important part of the understanding of man and man's existence in his world. Man is not a scientific subject, but man is first of all somebody who uses things. He is first of all pragmatic, acting, before he is observing.

The things are first of all *for us*, adaptable to our purposes before they are in themselves what they are, or, as we call it, pure objects. This leads to the general statement that the active relationship of man to his world precedes the contemplative relationship. This has many other consequences also, but I want first to apply this fundamental insight to the problem of the technical realm, of technology in general terms.

What is the relationship of action and contemplation? To understand this it is good to observe an animal and to ask oneself – for instance, if one has a dog, a cat – how are *they* dealing with their environment? Or in other terms: what *is* environment *for them*? You will find that for the dog, in your room, only a limited amount of realities are realities at all, namely those which are related to action. Where the animal acts, there they are; but otherwise they are not ... As I said, for animals, things are never things, but objects of action and not of contemplation. Therefore if we use the term "environment," we must say that for an animal, his environment has nothing to do with *our* environment. Not the same realities constitute his environment which [constitute ours, because *our* environment has also elements of contemplation, of aesthetics, of memories, of historical consciousness and many other elements which belong to our cultural creativity and therefore create a quite different environment. Now this has an immediately important religious consequence: the environmental theories are all wrong for the reason that they presuppose a stable environment and are not aware of the fact that environment is always [70]

a matter of correlation, namely a correlation between he-who-has-the-environment, and the environment. We can certainly say that the environment influences us, and in this sense is cause for many things happening to us and done by us. On the other hand, the other side is equally strong, that every spontaneous and free human being (animals as well as man) creates their environment by the very character of this correlation between themselves and the environment.

Now this is a fundamental insight which we must use also as a criterion to criticize the environmental theories.

Secondly, man, beyond this, is able to have objects as mere objects, not as objects of action but as objects of contemplation, etc. – i.e., for instance the aesthetic relationship: this is already clear if you compare the expressive sounds of animals with the designative character of human language. Men also have expressive sounds, and perhaps primitive men have more of expressive sounds than of designative concepts. But in one moment of the development, very slowly perhaps, but some time it happens that man is able to grasp universals with his language, that he has *not only* the expressive but also the designative language – designating objects qua objects. It is very interesting that such differences always reappear on the soil of mankind itself. For instance, we can compare the Greek attitude towards reality with the modern. In Greece, the objectivation of the world reached its top. The Greek philosophers, and already the Greek language, was able to produce a system of concepts with which it was possible to grasp reality as contemplated, as a totality of calculable or intuitive objects. This is the Greek attitude, and the greatness of the Greeks. On this basis, they were able to produce science and philosophy, and history.

When we come to the modern time, the situation seems to be different. And you can observe that in the Renaissance period. Take a man like Leonardo Da Vinci: [he did not simply renew the Greeks, as the Renaissance generally speaking is not a *renewal* of the Greek and Latin attitude. But he used Greek concepts, of course – as all Renaissance people did – but he did it in connection with his activities: building ... [?], building water institutions, building even airplanes, in his imagination and in his drawing. The technical point of view starts in the Renaissance from the very beginning, while in Greece proper, the contemplative, the theoretical, point of view was always predominant.

Now what is the reason for this? It is the general reason: for the transformation of antiquity into something new in the Renaissance. It is a quite inadequate idea that the Renaissance is a rebirth of Greek rationalism, and now this terrible rationalism came into this world and ruined good old theology! – Now this kind of thinking is entirely non-historical and is dangerous because it deepens the unnecessary gap between reason and revelation – or however the relationship is called. The transformation which happened in the Renaissance is fundamental, in many respects – I cannot go into this now, but I probably can later. But one of the main differences is the active interest which from the very beginning was connected with the cognitive interest in the modern world, and probably – or I would say certainly – the reason for this is that the Renaissance grew up on Christian soil, and even if some Renaissance philosophers tried hard to become pagans (as also modern philosophers try hard – it could not succeed: you cannot jump over your own shadow, you cannot cease to live out of the spiritual substance which has transformed you for centuries of historical development). And this is all clear in the Renaissance. For instance, when the Renaissance revived astrology, it changed it at the same time. In the ancient world, astrology is a calculation of an inescapable fate; in the Renaissance astrology, it is not an inescapable fate, but it is the winds which drive the boat and the

sail, but the man who stands on the rudder is able to give the direction. This imagery which we often find in Renaissance pictures is characteristic of such transformation. On the basis of Christianity, the ultimate responsibility of man remains, even in view of astrology.

And then in *our* case: the desire of the Jewish and Christian development, Jewish and Christian prophetism, to transform reality; the element of hope – which belongs to Jews and Christians – is something which drives towards action, towards an action which transforms reality according to an ideal. Such an action was *not* in the religious substance [72] of Greek thinking. E.g., the Greeks came to ultimate symbols, they had a quasi or total mystical character – in Plato, the participation in the world of true essences, in the Good itself, in terms of a mystical initiation; in Aristotle, the participation of the eternal self-intuition of God; in the Stoics, the elevation of the wise man over the movements of reality to eternity with the logos; and in Neoplatonism, the mystical ecstasy. Now all this shows that the religious substance of the Greeks is mystical, and not world-transforming. The only power in the ancient world which transformed reality, to a certain extent – from the point of view of the law – were the Romans, but not the Greeks; and the Romans were not creative in contemplating reality, in contemplating the world.

Therefore the Renaissance has the Christian substance of the responsible transformation of reality. And perhaps I should add it anyhow now: behind this substance, again, a religious symbol, namely the doctrine of creation. Creation means that the substance of the world comes from the divine Ground and not from a matter which resists the divine, as in Greece. Therefore the basic element of the modern worldview, on the basis of the idea of creation, believes in the possibility of having the spiritual within the world of the created world. It believes in the ability to transform reality, while in Greek thinking this possibility is never envisaged. The individual elevates himself above reality and liberates himself out of the bondage to matter, into the spiritual realm.

Now this gives me occasion to another footnote, namely that the Greek worldview is substantially tragic, and the Christian worldview is substantially active and determined by hope. Now this seems to be quite different, but even another point supports this, namely the fact that Christian ascetics invaded Christianity *after* the Biblical period through the invasion of Platonism, and that Protestantism reduced this influence again to a great extent. Christian asceticism is disciplinary asceticism, but not metaphysical asceticism. Metaphysical asceticism – the desire to elevate oneself out of the material world – is Greek, but not Christian. But of course it came into Christianity and produced many ascetic forms of the ancient church and the Middle Ages against which, in the name of Biblical Christianity, Protestantism revolted.

Now why did I say all this in connection with the realm of technology? Because *every* human emphasis has ultimate roots, has roots in an ultimate concern. [So has also the technical emphasis of the modern world since the Renaissance. Contemplation became a help for transformation, but not a purpose in itself.] [73]

I will now discuss the logical structure of the technical realm and then its creative greatness, its estrangement, and its possible healing in relation to man's ultimate concern. If I give you a little of the philosophy of the technical realm, then I don't do it in itself in order to give this in itself, but in order to prepare the second consideration, namely how this is related to the religious symbolism, to man's ultimate concern.

So first: philology and philosophy of the “technical.” The word comes from the Greek

[?] which means “succeeding,” “reaching something.” Wherever adequate means are used in order to bring something into being, there we have the technical structure. If we

give this definition – reaching something, or forming something, with adequate means – then we have a very large concept of the technical, and certainly we need it.

Our next statement can be: which means, nature uses technical means; or more exactly, nature is technical in one of its elements. Every new form in the biological realm, every new genus and species, develops new organs – feet, hands – and in man it develops the hands by liberating them from the need to walk on them and climb with them. It makes something new out of this organ, a means for the end of grasping things. And the power of grasping is of course the root of all technology.

Or there are other pre-formations of technical products. We are now observed by a technical camera* in the background of this room, but the *technical* camera is only a continuation of the natural camera, which is the eye of living beings, especially the human eye; and the bodily form and wings of birds pre-form the airplane, so that in nature you can follow this through in innumerable cases (I can give you only a few examples). All technical development is a continuation of these natural—————*Earlier in the lecture, a “Life” magazine photographer had entered the classroom, disrupting things, to photograph for an article on Harvard Divinity School which appeared in a December 1955 issue. – Ed. [technical elements in nature. Now this means the technical is a creative reality. And I emphasize this so much because I want to warn my theological friends against a shallow contempt of the technical, which has often spread and has led to a confrontation or contrasting of the technical and the human, or the spiritual.

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If higher organs are developed which can do more, in technical terms, the other organs are reduced, sometimes to a complete disappearance. New devices are produced by nature, and older devices are dropped. Think, for instance, of the device we call the human brain, and which has, as an intrinsic consequence, the dropping of many powers which we find in higher animals.

In the human brain, with the help of this means for ends, this technical organ, a change happens in the relation of means and ends. In nature, insofar as it has technical elements in itself, means and ends are always identical. The organs – for instance the eyes – are parts of that for which they are used, namely the living structure, the living totality. And the whole is the basis for the development of every organ. Everything in a living organism is used for the living organism and *everything in it*, so that here the means become ends, and the ends become means. Now this situation is not true any more after the human brain has appeared, in the development of the living substance on earth. In man this identity of means and ends is dissolved. The means serves an end which is not itself. After reaching the end, the means can disappear – the tool can be thrown away, or it can be used for another end. But *it is not used for itself*.

Now this is a fundamental change. And this is a change on which all technological development is based.

In man we can distinguish the technical as an element in all human activity; there is no human activity in which there is no technical development at all, in which there are no means for ends.

This gives two types of technical functions. The one is the technical element in *all* human activity – for instance in my speaking here to you; and the other is the production of the tools by changing a part of the encountered reality for a purpose. [In *both* cases we have the means-ends relationship, but in the first case, tools are not always needed, though often used. In the 2nd case, technology is the production of tools. Now for the first case, think of the technical elements which are used in administration, in teaching, in banking, even in preaching, in healing, etc. But we don't call this the world of technology.

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Nevertheless, nothing of this can happen without special means used for ends, and that means technical elements. So we have now the technical in both all nature, at least all higher nature (probably also lower nature), and we have it in all human functions and activities in which something is done, with a purpose. Let me call this universally human element of technique “supporting technique.” They support existing life processes, for instance the teaching relationship, the healing relationship, the preaching relationship, the counselling relationship. They develop their potentialities and protect them against disturbances. Therefore every teacher has not only to learn the material he uses in order to teach his pupils, but also a large amount of technical adequacy. And the preacher has not only the Gospel – or better: good theology based on the Gospel – but he has *also* to learn how to preach – and where the word “how” appears, there we are in the technical realm.

Then, in all of them, means are applied for ends. But now we come to the other realm, namely if tools are produced. In these “supporting” forms of technology, tools are not *always* used. Sometimes they are. For instance, if a doctor tells you to take a walk every day, this is not the creation of a tool. If he gives you a drug, he uses a tool. Both is medicine. Each is a technique for dealing with the body from the point of view of healing. In all the technical realms, the knowledge of technique is the know-how – this famous word, which is supposed to be the characteristic of the American nation! “How”: this word means “adequate ways for action.” Not contemplating, not desiring, not hoping, but using the given realities as a means for a purpose in action. This is true of both forms.

Now I come to the other. If *tools* are used, we come to the transforming technology. The first was “supporting,” where not always are tools used. The second is “transforming,” where a given reality is transformed into a tool. Now this is the most [used form – if we use the term “technique,” [as] we think of it usually – the most perfect expression of it is the machine. When we speak of the relationship of religion and the technical realm, we mostly think of the machine and its consequences for the spiritual life. In this kind of technical activity, there is a material used which is not foreign to the end for which it is used. Trees have their life in themselves. If they are used for chairs, this use is foreign to them. Metals grow in nature; they are used for innumerable tools. Chemicals are drawn from plants, but they now serve other purposes.

That means: here a reality is created which is completely determined by its purpose, and by nothing else, except the purpose. If a machine does not fulfill its purpose any more, it becomes old iron, and is thrown away. A condemned house is a rubble or an aesthetically interesting ruin, but it is not a house any more. The means-character, the tool-character, has disappeared.

Technical creations, for this very reason, are completely subjected to the principle of rationality. Here is one of the reasons for the fear all romanticism has of the technical realm: because of its total rationality. The rationality is expressed first in the inner adequacy of the technical to its purpose, the transition of all superfluous elements in it and (I come to this later), the inner beauty of this complete adequacy, complete exclusion of that which does not belong to it. Any deviation from this principle of rationality, any trimming in order to beautify it, is actually the deprivation of its real beauty. The only beauty the complete technical product has, is its complete rationality.

From this follows that the product is *controlled* by man – the rational control of the technical products. This again is possible only because there is a complete subjection to the natural laws. This is a very interesting correlation: man who controls the technical

product completely can control it only if he subjects himself completely to the natural laws which he uses in order to create the technical product. In the moment in which he deviates from them, not only is ugliness the consequence, but also destruction. Now when I speak of complete rationality, please don't make a mistake: I don't speak here of the rationality of invention. The greatest technical inventions have [happened in a moment of intuition, in a moment in which something happened to a mind, two or more things suddenly came together; and that is the same thing with the great discoveries in science. But after this has been done, after the idea has, in an experience which has often been compared with inspiration, grasped a human mind, the fulfilment is a matter of complete rationality.]

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Out of this follows a third and religiously extremely important point, namely the possibility of perfecting every technical product indefinitely, the indefinite perfectibility of the technical creations. And out of this side of the rationality has arisen one idea which then (as ideas sometimes are: imperialistic, like men and nations) has conquered the whole human mind, namely the idea of progress. The idea of progress is born in the technical realm. The ancient world had no such idea, and it is possible only on the religious foundation of the ability of the world to be transformed. But in the moment in which you apply the idea of progress to other realms, then the idea becomes impossible. The catastrophe of the idea of progress, in those realms in which supporting techniques are applied – in politics, in education, except their technical part – are the reason for the breakdown of the idea of progress in our present world. [?]

I know that this is not an easy thing. When I came to this country 22 years ago and talked to my theological students in Union Theological Seminary, and told them that I don't believe in the idea of progress as a universal law of history, then *these theologians*, please, told me: "then you take all faith away from us!" That means: not God, not eternity, not salvation (or whatever the great religious symbols are) are that in which they believe, but progress! And this shows actually the character of Protestantism in that time.

Now in the mean time, the progressivistic [sic.] idea has broken down, and the very fact that this is the case is probably one of the reasons for the tremendous amount of emptiness, cynicism, skepticism, and even despair in many of the younger generation today, because all this is always the consequence of a metaphysical disappointment. And it was a real ultimate concern, what progress meant, and if such an ultimate concern is disappointed, then a gap of emptiness opens itself. Now what actually has happened here was the illusion that that which is possible in the technical realm, in the realm