

Religion and Culture by Paul Tillich

A digital edition of Paul Tillich's Lecture "Religion and Culture"
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Lecture X – Nov. 1, 1955

There are problems left from my last discussion of the relationship of religion and the technical realm. The one was the question of progress, which I think was very much in the mind of many of you, and rightly so. One of you asked me whether there is a progress in scientific research, and this brings me to a more general answer. Wherever man has a purpose and uses means for this purpose, there is a technical element. It is what I call, in my first division of the different forms of techniques, supporting techniques and not transforming techniques. Therefore you could apply this question also to education, to politics, to all those realms in which man has purposes and uses means for ends. In this sense, there is a large amount of technical means for ends in every scientific work. But there is something else also, in scientific work, and about this "something else" we want to talk when we come to the special subject: religion and science.

So this is my general answer. All these things, in the reality of life which we treat here, point by point, do not appear in the reality of life point by point, but they appear in togetherness, and the function of a lecture like this is to *distinguish*, but not to *separate*. And I think that is something we all have to learn – especially in the academic world, where we always make distinctions – that if we make them, this does not mean that we separate realities. Distinctions are justified where variables are independently variable, where factors are independently variable. There we must make distinctions. But the reliability of factors doesn't mean that these factors can be separated from each other. Now that is a very primitive logical footnote, but I have a lot of experience about this: whenever I made a distinction, somebody comes and says, "But can you separate these things?" And the answer is always, of course, "No, you cannot." But you must distinguish, nevertheless, because they are independently variable. Now this is also the case with these distinctions which we must make here, in order to go step by step from one relationship of religion to a cultural function, to the other. It does *not* mean separation. And I think I indicated this very clearly last time when I spoke, as an example, about the relationship of the visual arts and the technical realm. And I may add something here also – but first the answer to the question of progress involved in it. |

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Progress is tied up with the technical realm, and with no other realm. But since the technical realm *appears in* all other realms, there are elements of progress in all other realms also. But these elements of progress should not betray us into the belief that the essential nature of these realms has something to do with progress – I gave you, as an

example, the art of the Sumerians and the art produced today in Boston: you cannot say it is “progress” from the one to the other. Some people say, with a strong romantic tendency, “There is only regression, and not progress at all.” And when I was given the picture of one of the priestesses of the Sumerians, about 3000 years ago, and compared it even with the best *greek* things of the Archaic Greek period, I must say I am more inclined to say “regression” than “progress”! But I wouldn’t say it [laughter] – it was only my immediate feeling!

I come now again to the relationship of the visual arts and technique, and here I naturally emphasize architecture because in architecture the relation of the artistic and the technical element is especially important. Here again I want to answer a question I was asked by an architect who was in my lecture last time, as to whether it wouldn’t be justified to take into consideration the desire of feeling at home in a room and, when you enter your house, to look at something which is beautiful – whatever this word may mean – but [be?] dependent on the feeling of this man; isn’t it too strict (was the implication of this question) to demand a kind of honesty (which was my main demand in relationship of technical and artistic creation), so that many emotional values are sacrificed for the sake of architectural honesty.

Now to this I would answer: It belongs to architectural honesty, and (as I said before) I believe that the human body feels surrounded by materials of the natural world which are adapted to the special character – let us say, of the skin – and from this point of view I would say: even if it is not architecturally necessary to have wood within a room, it is not against the principle of honesty to have it because it is warm and gives us a feeling like a good dress, which, *also*, *has* to give a feeling to our body of adequacy of the material to the nature of the skin. Now these are considerations which enter the demand of honesty, and any puritan regression, in *this* respect, would be far away from my own understanding. [But what I *am* fighting against – and now, after many years, in agreement with most all important architects – is to take a trimming of the past which once *had* a meaning (for instance, little Gothic towers, or very expensive Gothic windows in a school of today) – all these kinds of things are dishonest. And here I would be strict, and if you call it “puritan,” I would, for this exceptional case, accept this criticism of being a puritan! [smiling]. I would give you an example: Rockefeller Center, in New York, which I hope you all know. For me, this belongs to what the ancient people called the Seven Miracles [i.e. Wonders – ed.] of the world. I know many Europeans who came here and said to see this alone is worth the whole trip, from Europe to New York. And I agree with them. It is an expression of almost completely honest character, and only an exaggerated criticism points to the few trimmings, which couldn’t be avoided by the unhappy architect because he had to do what he was told to do. But beside that, it’s something which is indeed a whole city in itself, and a city which reminds me of some of the best of the old city of Tuscania [i.e., Tuscany – ed.], San Giuliano [?sp], and other places, where you have a similar architecture on the basis of the necessity and honesty of *that* time. [92]

Now I come to another overlapping reality which must be distinguished, but cannot be separated, from the technical realm, namely the economic realm. We shall have, *anyhow*, a discussion about religion and economics, probably not before next semester, but what I have to do here is simply to relate these two realities to each other from the point of view of the technical side.

All technical action serves that production of man by which he satisfied his needs. This production is called “economy” – interesting, that the word itself is derived from

oikos, which means “house” in Greek: building the house in which man can live.

But this house which “economy” builds has not only the function to give shelter, it also gives food and clothing and all the other needs which must be satisfied. Man is that being which is *essentially dissatisfied*, and every economic act has the intention of giving satisfaction beyond what is immediately at hand. And this is, as we know, very, very little in comparison to the infinite possibilities which are given to man in nature. Now these infinite possibilities are produced and taken out of the state of mere potentiality into that of actuality, by technical activities. The most primitive [tools serve needs and produce economic values – food, clothing, shelter, and other things connected with it – warmth, etc. [93]

Now a very interesting dialectical situation arises, namely the situation that these tools which are means for the ends of economy, get a kind of independent existence. And the more they are developed, the more they give *more* possibilities. And if they are *fully* developed, as they are in the Machine Age, they give practically endless possibilities for human production.

Now then, two things happen. The one is that the technical production – production of tools and production of values *with* these tools – has another element of what I called last time the principle of rationality, with respect to all technical tools – namely, economic rationality. This has to be added to the other elements of rationality which make it possible that in the technical realm infinite progress is given. But even if the progress is infinite in itself, it is still limited by economic rationality. You cannot build every building which is desirable, at Harvard campus. There are economic limits to this, out of the whole economic situation, even of the richest country in the world, and there are limits of this kind everywhere which make the application of the technical tools depend on another element of rationality which is not an immediate element of rationality in the technical process itself, but on which the technical process is always dependent. But now it happens that the presence of tools, of means of production produced by tools, and especially tools in the larger sense of the word – machines – , have possibilities which go far beyond the immediate needs satisfied by economy. And then a very important process begins, namely the *possibility* of man to *produce*, – “produce” not only means to *satisfy* needs, but also produces *needs*. And this production of needs out of the infinite possibilities of the technical realm is one of the main factors in the present-day economy. The main tool in it is what we call “advertisement,” which produces these needs and which is, therefore, in the *whole* relationship of technical possibility and economic production, one of the most conspicuous factors. You will find, in many analysis of our present world situation, especially sharp attacks on the function of advertisement; and if, as I was told, almost ten millions of income go into advertisement, then one may feel that something is wrong in this situation [because advertisement, *also*, has two functions. In the one sense it is a necessary function, namely announcing that there are products which can be used for the satisfaction of needs, and that is the legitimate function of advertisement, which is always going on. And there is the other function, what one calls “high-pressuring,” on the evoking of needs. And that is what is going on to such an extent that today the situation becomes more and more so, that that which *can be reached* with the help of advertisement, and with the help of the tools to which the advertisement points, is spoiled by that by which it can be reached. Now that is a paradoxical statement which will become a very important factor in the life at least of your generation – it is already partly in my generation. You can go easily to every place in the world today, but when you *go*, it is not the place to which you want to go, because the means of going there [94]

have spoiled it, have ruined it, and not only in terms of advertisement but also in terms of those machines which make it possible that we reach it. It is almost impossible today, in Europe – and I warn you if you plan to travel in Europe – to find *any* place where one can enjoy quietly the beauty of old European cities or lakes or mountains or whatever you want, because the means of transportation to these places ruin the places. This is a very profound dialectic of means and ends – the fact that advertisement ruins the American landscape is obvious to everybody who goes through streets and roads where, by chance or great luck or divine Providence, they are spared from advertisement. If this is *not* the case, it makes no sense to drive there any more because the means for driving – for instance, [the] car – are announced every ten meters, and ruin the landscape. And so on and so on – your imagination is big enough to continue this lamentation of Jeremiah! [much laughter]

Now we have here a problem, one of the many problems which I want to bring to a deeper level now:

Possibility istemptation, in all realms of life. Where there is possibility, there is temptation. And *temptation*, in the technical realm, is based on the possibility of producing innumerable things. And this can be done actually, only if, at the same time, needs are created so that the production of these things can economically be justified. | [95]

Now I come to a general consideration of the relationship of technology and man. Here I want to be, first, *without* any lamentation, but full of praise, for the technical realm. There are many elements of the relationship of technical and man, where the praise is a [?] praise. Man becomes creator. This word is itself a problematic word. It is derived from the religious symbol of creation and has been applied to man. It is almost impossible to prohibit any newspaper writer from using the word “creative” in every article he writes about somebody; and there are even classes in “creative” writing. Now we cannot change this, so we have at least to say one thing: man indeed has the dignity that he is allowed to participate in the creative process which is going on in every moment, here and now, because God has *not* created once-for-all, but He *is* creating here-and-now, in every moment.

This gives man a dignity which no other being has. He has indeed *continued* the original always-active divine creation beyond itself to something new. That is the first thing we must acknowledge in the technical realm.

Second: What is created are new realities. These realities also, are potentially given in nature. They are discovered, they are found, they are not originated in the human mind. But without the human mind, they would never appear. So we can say: every technical creation is produced out of the state of potentiality, in original creation, in the original divine creation, into the state of actuality by man’s technical activity. And such a technical product has a strong power of being. It has a power of being, as you can test by the way in which children react to it, looking at them, today often more intensively than at trees or even the ocean or the mountains. And this power of being is real power of being; it is limited, as [is] everything finite; it ages, and technical products, after they have become old-aged, are more ridiculous than living beings when they become old-aged. Human beings can become wiser, and sometimes they *become* [so]. (Although not always.) Technical products – the first automobiles, for instance – are somehow funny, they produce a kind of feeling of [being] ridiculous, if you look at them, although *in principle* they are admirable: they are the beginning of a great development, but they really lose their standing as tools and become museum-pieces.

This is the double reality: man creating, and the created product has a power of being,

more finite perhaps than other powers of being, but very impressive anyhow as a real creation, not produced totally by man but discovered as a possibility which lies already in the genuine creation. [Here we can now define clearly the limits of man's creativity. [96] He can produce into actuality something which is potentially already given in the world as it is given to him.

Another consideration about technology and man is the *liberating* power of technology. Technology liberates man in many respects. The first is: it liberates him from the limits of his temporal and spatial finitude – not altogether, certainly, but to a large extent. And what has happened only since my own childhood in this respect, in the last half century, is incredible, about overcoming the limits of time and space. But now let me here make an anticipatory footnote following the question about progress. Here we see where progress can force upon us by ourselves, namely by railway, airplane, telegraphy, etc.: they have conquered distance in space, and distance in time – which is needed in order to overcome this space – to a tremendous degree. In this way they have united mankind, technically, again to such a degree that mankind is *really* now a unity in which what happens in the remotest tribe-movement in inner Africa, or wherever it may be, has repercussions in all centers of the world. Is that progress? Now it has produced the *largest* gap between mankind universally, which has ever existed. It has produced a telluric schizophrenia, a split mind, on a worldwide scale, or earth-wide. This was the answer. And it is very interesting for future historians: the technical union of the world occurred most speedily in connection with two world wars – and has made them possible. That is one thing.

Second: The liberating power of technology with respect to human work – and that is perhaps the greatest part of it. We all still have to perform mechanical functions all the time, using tools and becoming tools ourselves in a merely mechanical way – carrying things, etc. In former centuries and millennia, *all* work was done by human bodies pressed into mechanical functions. Therefore most of these cultures, which have produced miracles of the world, [such] as the Pyramids, were slave-states. There had to be a large amount of human bodies – I say “bodies” intentionally – which could be used for mechanical purposes in such a way that the mechanical means were identical with the human bodies.

Now there is an element of justification in giving mechanical tasks to all of you, to our children, because our body is constructed in such a way that some mechanical tasks are needed in order to keep it alive. But what was done in these cultures was actually the destruction of bodies and souls of man. The bodies as tools were slowly broken down and died very early, and the souls were never able to experience the creative freedom which the few *could* experience at whom we are looking now as representatives of great culture. Here obviously the technical progress has produced possibilities for human liberation which are immense. And there are always realms still left. And if today the center of the discussion is taken by the concept of automation, we must first consider this *not* from [the point of view of the way we can *economically* deal with a radical automation, but [97] we must *first* look at the way in which the remaining mechanical functions of the human body are taken over by the machine. And even mechanical elements of the human brain – this is the justification of the artificial brains. The artificial brains *never* are able to produce anything new. They always can only act as mechanical *fulfillers* of that which is put into them as potentiality. But they cannot go beyond this. And insofar as they do this, they again liberate man from a kind of toil which is not necessary.

Another side of the liberating power of technics is the liberation from pain and want,

to a great extent. I don't need to go very much into this. Anesthesia, and all that is connected with it, is a tremendous liberation. Now of course in all these cases, one asks: *isn't* there an element of pain needed in order to keep the body alive? This certainly is the case. But the problem is *unnecessary* mechanical work, and *unnecessary* pain, and *unnecessary* limits in terms of finitude.

Then a last point here, in this connection. The technical progress has *de*-demonized nature. Now this demands a little explanation. In primitive cultus every natural object, and most technical objects, are filled with magic power. And magic power is always ambiguous. It is creative and destructive at the same time. It is dangerous to use it; only good rituals can help us to use it rightly. So a feeling of fear of these powers is widespread in mankind. If an object is completely rational, subject to the principle of rationality, as we have discussed it, the demonic possibility is taken away from it. This again is an element of liberation in the technical realm – it is interesting that if an early progress was made in railway speeds, or for airplanes, and other things earlier than that, there were always people who were afraid of it as demonic creations which are dangerous. But finally they became used to it, and now the fear of the demonic in all these realities has disappeared.

Now the “but” comes, namely the other side of technology and man. Just the *last point* is so important: as long as there is a demonic power in reality, it also has radiating power, it can attract us, we can unite with it. If it is completely subjected to technical purposes, it has become empty. And we can say: the eros-relationship is gone. And that is something which we experience in our world. The emptiness of our lives is not only dependent on the technical realm – much can be said and will be said about this, in these lectures – but one of the important factors in destroying the eros-relationship between man and things is based on the fact that man is able to control completely the technical object; and what you can control completely, there is no eros to it in you left. Even with respect to people, psycho-technics try to do that. And here it is especially clear to see how the eros is destroyed. If you calculate a man completely, somebody whom you love, *inasmuch* as you calculate him the right relationship, the eros relationship, is destroyed and replaced by a controlling relationship. That is what happens all the time. The use of diplomacy [in marriage is unavoidable, but is an expression of the fundamental [98] estrangement of all human situations and of an element of estrangement in the marriage relationship also. There is also a revenge coming from the things, if they are completely controlled. We have lost the eros to them, and they have lost the eros to us. They come not *to us*, showing us something of what they are themselves. They show only what they are by what we make of them. And so an empty eros-less relationship between man and things spreads all over the whole civilization in which this is the case.

This leads me once more back to that point I want to make and which is probably the most important of it, namely the relationship of eros and the infinite possibility of the technics. This brings us into a profound theological concept: concupiscence, the concept of endless desire. Now desire to fulfill ourselves by what we are lacking, is an element of eros; and it is *good*, in this respect, and it *should* be so. But there is the *endlessness* of the desire, and this endlessness is again a symptom of estrangement. Where there is endless desire, there the union with anything or anybody is impossible. You immediately go beyond him or her to something else. Now this of course is especially clear in the sexual relation. You go beyond the immediate object of your sexual attraction, you fulfill it to a certain extent and then you go beyond it again. And *indefinitely* so. Don Juan is the symbol for this. Now what is lacking in it? Why not? I would not say

because it is forbidden, or anything like that. That is not an answer. But I would say: because you miss the person; because the *person* with whom you are connected in this way, is the object of a *limited* desire. It *excludes* others. And the same thing is with the world of objects: something is *excluded*, if you have something else. Of course there is a drive in us, in *all* of us, to draw the whole of reality into ourselves. And the machine is perhaps the highest, and in this sense in a new way the most demonic, symbol for this insatiable desire to go beyond anything given to the new which is given. Now in almost a caricature, this is the case in the selling and buying attitudes of our present trade activities, where everything which is one or two years old of usage is thrown away and replaced by something new, and the main attraction of something new is that it has a little bit more gadgets, or a little bit different, maybe essentially even less work, but there is something new in it, and so it is better than what was before. This kind of drive is the symbol for what the old theology called “concupiscence,” endless desire. The desire in itself is good, it belongs to human finitude – we all need the other one and the other thing. But the infinity of it: that is what the old theology condemned as concupiscence, the endlessness of it. [99]

If we therefore ask ourselves: how can we overcome this situation? (which certainly cannot be overcome absolutely in our situation of time and space – we cannot create a utopian situation), then the only answer I can give is one which has been given in a book by my friend Professor [Herbert] Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, who is in Brandeis, a sociologist, and his answer, in this analysis, is *eros*, in some way.* Now I don’t know whether the answer can be used in the whole of society as a real transformation of the forms of life as we live together today. There the problem of the interpretation of history, of utopia, etc., comes in. But the fundamental point of this answer is true, that the eros relationship between man and man, between man and object, has been lost. I first noticed that when I came to this country and saw people go into the nature. There are others, and it is never the final insight you have, if you observe something in this country – it is always something else also. But at least it was a partial impression I had – they go into the car, they run to the country, they stop for a look, take their N. Y. Times, read it, and go on! [laughter] This is “going out into nature.”

Now what is lacking here? What is lacking is eros, because eros means commitment to that which you want to have, with which you want to fill your need. And then something miraculous happens: nature also commits itself to you, and comes to you, and this is a mutual relationship. But if you treat it as something at which you look in glimpses and then go on speedily, then it *doesn’t reveal itself to you*. That is one example for the situation in which the possibilities ruin the eros relationship. And what I want, as my last word to this whole section on technology and religion, is [to say] that religion, on the basis of becoming ultimate concern, may *help* us perhaps to be concerned on this basis about the *preliminary* things in an ultimate depth, and the ultimate depth of *all* relations between finite realities is love. —————*PT, in aside to visitor in the audience (Jacob Taubes): “I see that you have it with you!”