

# 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 XI – Nov. 3, 1955[Prof. Leibrecht announcing a 3-hour exam after Reading Period. Bibliography:

H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ & Culture*;

Schleiermacher, *Speeches on Religion*;

W. M. Urban, *Language & Reality*;

J.H. Randall, *The Making of the Modern Mind*;

Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith & History*.

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PT: Now these five books I gave you as something you should read under all circumstances during the course. The others will be important for examination and things like that, so don't think that this is *all*. But I have been asked by many of you to indicate which books you should read in the meantime, and that is what I gave now.

*Discussion with students:*

*Question:* Prof. Tillich, please comment about the influence of technological, industrial society upon our religious sensitivity. For example: our verbal symbols of religion, like "God," "Jesus," "Christ," are used very casually, in swearing or other unconscious practice. What kind of harm is there in this? What can one do when some friend or stranger uses these names without reverence? Is this blasphemy?

*Answer (Paul Tillich):* This question asks about the irreverent use of words like God, Jesus, Christ, etc., in the technological society. I don't believe that this irreverence with respect to these words has anything to do with technical society. The blasphemous use of sacred words was perhaps much more ordinary in periods in which faith was not shaken at all because it was nearer the mouth to the tongue of everybody at that time, and we find a lot of indications that the ministers of that time had to fight, in sermons, against this kind of abuse. The only thing one perhaps could say is that if they are used today, they are not even used in the swearing sense at all, but simply as words without meaning. I wouldn't call that blasphemy, but I would call it one of the innumerable symptoms of the sickness of our language.

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*Lecture:* Now I come today to a new chapter. After discussing last time Religion and the Technical Realm, we must now discuss Religion and Science, or let us call it: Religion and the Cognitive Realm, generally. Then, at the end, we come to Religion and the Artistic Realm.

Religion and the cognitive realm, the realm of knowledge, can be discussed in three steps: [1] The first step is Religion and the Natural sciences – what the word “science” means in the narrower sense. [101] 2) The next will be Religion and History – historical research and historiography. 3) The third step will be Religion and Philosophy.

You may ask whether there is nothing else but these three involved in the subject “Religion and the Cognitive Realm.” The reason I don’t go, for instance, into social sciences here, including psychology, is that in these realms it is not the special method which puts us before the problem Religion and Cognition, but it is the content, and from the point of *content*, they will come into the picture definitively and intensively; but from the point of method, it is enough to compare religious knowledge with scientific knowledge, with historical knowledge, from the point of view of the methodological approach in these three realms. Therefore our first consideration goes at the problem of religion and the cognitive realm.

When I go to the question of religion and science, then something happens to our emotional reaction. We all – and our whole culture – have a very definite and very disturbing remembrance of the past, through which we went in the last thousand or 2000 years – or even 3000 years. Our historical memory is not only a matter of historical knowledge in the theoretical sense, but it is the matter of something which has formed our subconscious, and therefore produces emotional reactions all the time, when we come to this subject religion-and-science. The reason is that for centuries, or for millennia, more exactly, deadly conflicts took place between these two realms of man’s spiritual creativity, and that fear and hate are still in the depth of most people today, on the basis of these conflicts. You can test that any time, when you speak to somebody, an ordinary man who is not philosophically educated, but you speak about Science and the Church, or something like that, you will immediately feel that there is a scar, that something has happened, even to this man, although it actually happened perhaps hundreds of years before his birth. [Now this is a very astonishing situation and demands the serious [102] consideration of both scientists (in the large sense of the word) and theologians.

The situation today is a little different. It is not a matter of conflict any more – or only in a very hidden and potential way. It is a cautious besides-each-other. But this is not a very good state of things either, because it is not cleared up scientifically: the essential relation of these two realms is still clouded by the past, by emotions and by confusions. Therefore what we have to do in a lecture like this is to try to dissipate both the emotional clouds and the theoretical confusions with respect to the relation of religion and science.

In order to do this, let’s first look at the causes which produced this state of things, which produced these emotions and confusions. If we look at the pre-scientific stages of the development of mankind, then we can distinguish within them a pre-mythological and a mythological state. But for our purposes, they are not much different. In both of them, the holy and the secular are on one and the same place. They are not separated from each other – the one in a supernatural realm and the other in a natural realm – but the world as encountered is encountered both as secular and as sacred. The events happening in time and space are events of this world and, at the same time, events in which the divine manifests itself. *Everything* is both supernatural and natural, and

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therefore nothing is *only* supernatural and nothing is *only* natural. The divine is present, as hidden power in the pre-mythological state, in cultures like that in which the mana-principle is predominant. Or it is present in terms of divine figures in the mythological stage, divine figures which have some transcendence but which, at the same time, are present actively in almost everything which happens in time and space. A man like the first so-called philosopher, Thales of Miletus, says, “The world is full of gods.” Now that’s the Greek feeling: there are gods everywhere, in every tree, in every river, in every cloud, in every lightning, and even in every technical instrument they can be present. Those of you who know the Homeric poems will remember how the gods continually act with respect to every special hero, not only the greatest ones but also the smaller ones; how they fight with each other – namely the gods and goddesses – about these people; [how they enter their life, continuously, again and again, in all great and important moments; how they direct reality. [103]

In the Old Testament, God appears in special moments – in the Prophets; He appears in special historical events – in the crowning of kings, in the judgment about them, in battles, in salvation of cities, in destruction of kingdoms – “the world is full of gods.”

In this whole kind of thinking, there is no possible conflict because the supernatural and the natural are on one and the same place. The world is full of divine-sacred, numinous power. Trees and stones and clouds are not what they are for us – things – but they are filled with the awe-inspiring presence of that which is the Ultimate.

Now let’s suppose that such a worldview, which is often hardly distinguished from magical techniques, although logical, the distinction is clear – that such a worldview has still its “residua,” in all of us in everybody; that the human race is not completely beyond this stage, and that for many people this is not the form in which the divine *must* be present if they can accept it at all; and that for others the divine cannot be seen in any other way, and that for this reason they reject it altogether. This is the large ten- and perhaps hundred-thousands of years’ background to the problem of Religion and Science. And without this background, we simply wouldn’t be able to understand the sharpness of the conflict, the emotional elements connected with it all the time.

The conflict started with the interpretation of the natural as natural, with the Greek concept of “phusis,” “natura” in Latin, both words meaning “that which grows by itself.”

When the early Greek philosophers wrote their poems “peri phuseos” (“about nature”), they tried to describe and to calculate what was observable and calculable. But this was an attitude of a quite different character from the character of the immediate experience of the numinous, the divine, in everything. They didn’t intend to deny the presence of the divine in reality, they are rightly called “the old theologians” – meaning that there was much theology still in their philosophy – but the *approach* was different. And out of this approach, out of the method, some fundamental change of man’s relationship to reality |developed. This became visible in the first typical scholar of the Pre-Socratic Greek, Anaxagoras, the first one who described the heavenly bodies – sun, moon, stars – as bodies. He saw that they were bodies. This was a tremendous first step because, before that, they were divine powers, representations of the fulness of the world with the divine. And now they were compared with bodies, i.e., with stones and pieces of earth! And the popular reaction in Athens when this became known was such that he had to go into exile. This was one of the earliest but most typical conflicts about science in relationship to the preceding worldview. [104]

Here the criticism came from science. It also could attack directly, in philosophical terms, the religious symbols with another kind of approach, namely historical analysis

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of their growth. This was done by men like Euhemeros, one of the Cynic philosophers, who derived the god-figures from deified heroes and kings. Now this is still done today, and we will come to it when we speak about religion and psychology later on. Today it is not so much heroes and kings, it is much more father-images from which the gods are derived, or mother-images. The method is exactly the same, and the method of course is very primitive, because it always produces one word which it wants to express, namely deification. In order to deify either the father-image or the image of a hero or king, you must have that realm into which they are elevated. Or in terms of a modern way of speaking about it technically: projection – you must have a screen at which to project something. Now, that screen *is* the divine sphere, *is* the infinite, or however you call it.

But in spite of this primitive logical mistake, which Euhemeros made as much as it is done today by many psychoanalysts, it was a conflict between science and religion, and one of the ways of solving this conflict was the attempt of the Stoic philosophers to interpret the gods as symbols of different natural powers. In this way they were preserved, and popular feeling was satisfied. But for the man who *knows*, they represent something quite different, namely the powers of nature, or, as I say, the powers of being. *And* if I say this, I would at the same time express my agreement with this interpretation, because the gods *are* powers of being, and symbols for them. |

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In Neoplatonism a more positive relation was again reached: the gods are manifestations of the One and have a kind of independent spiritual reality. As manifestations of the ultimate One, they are real, but they are not ultimate. They are gods, *under* the One – which is the ground of everything. But under this, they have their functions, in the whole of the universe. They are reduced gods, gods with a limited power, and all under the ultimate One. They then were conquered by the Christian God, who replaced them all and was, in Christian theology, identified with the ultimate One of Neoplatonism.

Now what you see here are two things: criticism and compromise. And these are the two ways in which the *whole* development moved *all* the time. And we will see what we do about that later on. But first let us go ahead.

In Christianity the decisive figures are Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. Augustine, as a Platonist, very much liked mathematics and mathematical physics. But he did *not* like natural science, going into the reality of bodily things. He declared that natural science is the job of the demons. Why? There was a very profound idea behind this, the idea that knowing and knower, he who knows and that which is known, are in a kind of eros-relationship, in a kind of community. It is demonic to be in community with the bodily world, because the bodily world fights against the spirit. This produced the predominant attitude, for centuries – for at least one-half thousand years of Western history – toward [the] natural sciences. They were under distrust – not mathematics but the real empirical knowledge of the bodily world.

The change came when Aristotle entered the scene against Thomas Aquinas and his predecessors and followers ... Through *him*, the empirical method became the new method of reaching not only natural knowledge but of reaching also the ultimate knowledge. The empirical method leads from [the empirical facts of the bodily world, step by step, in the famous Aristotelian ladder of potentiality and actuality, to the highest, to the divine. And the ultimate jump is made no more as a jump, but as the five arguments for the existence of God, on the basis of an empirical understanding of reality. Now this was of greatest importance because this brought again the natural world, in its empirical structure, into the interest of the medieval mind. On this basis, Thomas Aquinas produced his greatest synthesis, the great synthesis between the Christian tradition and all the knowledge about

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the nature of the world which was available at this time, especially with the help of the rediscovered Aristotle.

Now it was one of the many attempts to produce the great synthesis. In the last century we had two people who tried the same thing, and to whom we refer in different ways later on. Hegel the philosopher, and Schleiermacher the theologian. And before them, the philosophers of the Enlightenment – and before them, the early Renaissance philosophers. And after them, the Ritschlian and other schools.

We all stand, always, before the problem, which I can describe in the following way: from the very beginning, Christian theology was driven towards the production of the great synthesis. Synthesis does not mean putting-together, but means uniting in an essential creation, Christian tradition and the understanding of reality in its empirical structure. And each time, when such a great synthesis was reached, critics came and tried to dissolve it, and showed the joints, which were not real joints but only external compositions. And then a great disappointment and often intellectual despair, following the periods of the great syntheses. And so it was already in the 13th century with Thomas Aquinas, when [the most sharp-minded of all medieval theologians and philosophers, [107] Duns Scotus, tried to show the inadequacy of the Thomistic synthesis and tried to put the religious insights to the one side, and the insights in the structure of the universe to the other side.

Out of this criticism, which was carried through by the nominalistic movement, not only in the Middle Ages but also later in English empiricism, the intellectual fathers of all of us – as I said already, I think, and will repeat: you all are nominalists by birth! [some laughter] – these nominalists put the one of the one side, and the other on the other side. But life is not like this! And so it always happened that there were realms of conflict. And it developed, at the end of the Middle Ages, preparing the Renaissance, the classical doctrine of the double truth, a doctrine which says that the same statement – for instance, about the immortality of the soul – can be true in theology and not true in philosophy, and that the same statement about the validity of natural laws can be true in physics but not true in religion.

Now this doctrine, of course, means a complete schizophrenia, a split of the mind, and couldn't be maintained in the long run, it was necessary, in the period of the late Middle Ages, in order to survive, if one tried to make empirical studies, because this was the only way in which one could escape the at-that-time absolutely tyrannical power of the Church, which always becomes tyrannical, oppressive, producing the inquisition only in that period, when it feels threatened. And it rightly felt threatened at that time, and so its reaction was such that everybody who wanted to make scientific inquiries was in real danger, and the doctrine of the double truth was the subterfuge [under which it was [108] possible to hide one's critical attitude.

Around 1450, the modern development starts. And it starts with the two great names, Copernicus and Galileo. It is of greatest interest to know what happened, when they started the new astronomical worldview, and the new method of dealing mathematically with nature. Interesting is Luther's reaction against Copernicus. He denied it in the name of biblicism, which he sometimes had in a rather primitive way, while in other cases he was one of the critics of biblical literalism. And Galileo's trial before the Inquisition is common knowledge.

What was so terrifying for these men, Protestants as well as Catholics, in the new scientific astronomic world view? It was the end of the central position of the earth. In the whole Middle Ages and in the ancient world, with one exception, the earth was

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the center and everything else was moving around it. In the later development of the Pythagorean school, there was an attack on this. The Pythagoreans *saw* that the earth moves around the sun. But this idea was rejected under the guidance of Aristotle. There was a kind of conference of astronomers in which Pythagoreanism was rejected. So, during the whole Middle Ages, the Aristotelian worldview, with the central situation of the earth, was preserved. Of course, this was also the mythological worldview and the biblical worldview. And now the earth is out of this central position. It is one star like the others.

The meaning of this was immense, and we must have a little empathy for the Church of the 16th and 17th centuries, for which Pascal is the great witness – the feeling of lostness in the new universe, and the tremendous catastrophes this had for the emotional life. In this moment, [the whole Christian symbol was discovered as symbolism. Its [109] literal understanding had become impossible because the structure of reality had been discovered, and the force [?] of thought, in the pre-scientific stage, and still partly in the scientific stage, were taken out of possibility.

The Bible speaks of “above” and “below.” The primitive man sees God in Heaven “above,” and the demons in Hell “below,” and the earth “between,” as the place where the divine and the demonic powers fighting with each other, where the Christ appears, conquers the demonic world, will judge the universe and renew it. All these ideas were tremendously endangered for popular feeling in the moment in which the earth had lost its central character. And I can betray you the fact that even today, theology has not found the real answer to the questions involved in the possibility of other worlds, with conscious spiritual beings, in relation to the history of salvation as described in biblical literature.

This was a tremendous shock. It was a shock against the remnants of the mythological worldview, in the Aristotelian and Ptolemaic scientific interpretation of it. It was not the scientific interpretation *as such*, but it was the shock produced by the consequences of this scientific interpretation for the mythological worldview, giving a central position to the earth.

In this world, which then was finally formulated by Descartes and Newton as the great machine in which all the stars are moving according to eternal mechanical laws, man and his affairs were lost to such a degree that man was driven by that anxiety of which Pascal speaks, and [which became one of the main characteristics of our modern period. [110]

Now if we look at this, then we must say: what has happened was that the early mythological worldview, in which the natural and supernatural were mixed – and from this mixture, some symbols were derived – that this worldview was undercut by an observed and calculated universe. Of course the fight was hopeless, from the point of view of the Church, and the Church soon gave in, after its primary reaction. But the shock remained, and the shock is not completely gone. *And* I hope that you all, sometimes, go out during a night with clear stars, and imagine for a moment the immensities of time and space, and the infinite smallness of our historical existence, on this piece of matter in this universe. Now, whenever you do this, then you will have an empathetic participation in what has happened in these people who *first* were exposed to these ideas, to these concepts, to these calculations which are inescapable, and to the consequences of this for people who live in spite of a lot of scientific knowledge they already had – in the world which is divided into an “above” and a “below,” and that which is in the middle of it, namely you and me!