

Religion and Culture by Paul Tillich: Lecture XIIb

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We will finish today the discussion on religion and science. At the end of the Tuesday hour, I tried to show that religious symbols can neither be refuted nor confirmed by scientific results. In earlier periods, 1500 years ago, the problem was that from the side of science, religion was attacked, and the idea was that scientific results refute religious symbols. *Today* the problem is almost the opposite, namely that one has to be careful not to use present-day scientific results in order to confirm joyfully the truth of religion. Both ways are equally wrong and equally dangerous—that is the thesis of this whole section on religion and science, and that I tried to carry through in such a way that I showed that the earlier conflicts never were conflicts between merely scientific results and religious statements, but between worldviews, philosophical or religious, *behind* the scientific results which came into conflict with traditional religious forms. And I criticized both science and religion for not understanding this situation, for confusing the inquiry into the finite relationships of realities with each other, with the dimension of ultimate meaning as symbolized by them. Science does this by identifying religious presuppositions it has, consciously or unconsciously, with the scientific results itself. Theology does it by making, in the name of religious symbols, factual statements about the movements of finite realities. In both cases, a boundary line is trespassed; in both cases, a fundamental confusion of *dimensions* has taken place.

I spoke then about Lamarck's metaphysics of mechanism, about the danger of using the law of entropy, of the death of warmth, in order to prove the idea of creation *once upon a time*—not five thousand, but five billion years ago. I said that there is no difference [127] between five thousand or five billions of years; the question always remains: what was before it?—if we think in temporal terms. But if we think in terms of the relation of the eternal to the temporal, then we are in a dimension which does not give the answer in any way to the periods in which the world has developed as we see it today.

There is another rather interesting consideration, made by the famous physicist von Weizsäcker in Göttingen, who, in his book about the development of our cosmos, speaks about the historical element in physics. He says that not only *man* has history, but that there is an historical element in the physical development of the universe itself. He gives as an example the one-directed and non-circular development of the universe as we know it, also based on the law of entropy, of the death of warmth. And he says that the direction of time is known to us only because of the law of entropy, which is

unambiguous, and not returning, so that the universe, from this point of view, must also be understood as historical, although human freedom is involved only in an infinitely small period, which we call, ordinarily, history. Now here again I would say: insofar as this is a physical knowledge, it remains doubtful, and some physicists with whom I spoke questioned very much this theory about the historical character of the universe. In any case, it is controversial, in the scientific sense of the word, and therefore cannot be used in order to confirm the Augustinian over against the Stoic interpretation of time. The Stoic interpretation of time is the circular one: once the world has started, then it has moved through many periods whereby the present is usually considered to be the last, and the first one is considered as the Golden Age, or the period of the Paradise, and after this worst-of-all periods will come to an end, the world will burn and a new circular movement of the same kind will start. [128]

Now this is metaphysics and religion. It is a religion which is based on the emphasis on natural processes, on the emphasis on the repetitious character of the seasons, on the circular character of the movements of the stars. Over against this Stoic circular idea of time, which we all will find in India and in many other places in the world, we have in Augustine the linear interpretation of history: it has a beginning, a moment of creation; it will have an end, the moment of consummation, and it runs from period to period through this limited amount of time and has a center, and this center is the appearance of the Christ.

Now this is a question of ultimate concern, and has to be discussed in connection with the interpretation of history, which is always basically religious and can express itself in metaphysical terms. But if now somebody comes—[such] as Mr. von Weizsäcker, who is a very religious man and a great physicist at the same time, I estimate him very highly—and says, “There is so much evidence for the law of entropy that the time of the universe has the character of directed and not of circular time,” then I would say this is a scientific hypothesis which cannot be used from the point of view of theology in order to confirm Augustine over against Aristotle and the Stoics, because it is quite possible that there is some unknown physical reality which overcomes the effects of the law of entropy and which turns the wheel back. It is not possible to refute the Stoics in terms of physical time, as it is not possible to refute Augustine on the same basis. So here you have another example for the need to be cautious about these things. There are tendencies in physical time which confirm Augustine; there are others which confirm Aristotle. Even if today, under the tremendous impression which the law of entropy has made on all of us, we are more inclined to accept the Augustinian interpretation, we must nevertheless be clear-minded and cautious enough to say that *we don't know*, on the basis of *physics*, which interpretation is ultimately true. We can say it only in terms of ultimate concern, and this doesn't give an answer to any physical question, this only answers the question of the meaning of history for us. It is an existential question, and not a physical one. [129]

Now I hope that this additional consideration, where the temptation is very great today, makes it even clearer to you what I mean. But now we come to another consideration where my position seems to be almost hopeless, namely the position of non-interference of the dimensions, the biological and anthropological problems. Now let us first say a few things about the biological problems.

Has religion to say something which biology, the doctrine of life, has to accept on the basis of religious authority? If this were the case, then the conflict between the two realms would be hopeless. But I don't see any such necessity, and I will try to prove this

now.

In biological consideration, as long as there is a philosophy of biology, there is a fight going on between mechanistic and organicistic [sic.] interpretations of life. These two considerations seem to lead to opposite results; in the one case, all life is a casual, contingent result of mechanistic |constellations which, according to the law of probability, has happened perhaps only once in five billion years; it couldn't have happened more often. Now I would call such a theory absurd. [130]

Less absurd is another theory which says: there was once upon a time a readiness of the inorganic matter to go over into organic forms by slow transitions, and perhaps such realities as viruses, which we have lately discovered, may have been transitory forms of this kind. Now this certainly is much more adequate to the law of scientific research which tries to avoid as many absurdities or improbabilities as possible.

But now the method itself of dealing with living bodies in biology, of which the human body is only one example: the answer is that from a philosophical point of view, one simply must say that the *Gestalt*, the living structure (which is my translation of the German word *Gestalt*), or the living entity which we call living being, precedes the mechanisms which occur within it. For this reason, I would say no amount of mechanical, and especially chemical, research of qualitative character, in the biological method, can deny that all these processes occur in a being which has a definite structure—or, as Aristotle called it, an inner *telos*, *entelecheia*, so that, however the chemical processes may be, if there is a seed of an apple tree, an apple tree will always come out. However distorted by climate and winds, it is an apple tree and nothing else.

Now this is the strong point in the organicistic [sic.] consideration. On the other hand, the strong point in the mechanistic consideration is that you can calculate in all living bodies the chemical exchange processes in quantitative terms. That is the situation. Now I cannot go into this. I am convinced |that in *all* reality, structure precedes law, structure precedes mechanical necessity, that reality itself is always—even in the subatomic realm—structured and that, as some physicists call it, there are physical *Gestalten*, physical living structures, or better, independent structures, within which the quantitative processes are going on. [131]

Now this is the scientific situation, and this determines not at all the scientific method, but largely the philosophical implications of the scientific method. No organicist ever did deny to biology the right to go as far as it is possible at all with the quantitative analytic method of describing and expressing in mathematical terms the chemical processes which are going on in a body. On the other hand, he would always say they occur *within* something, and you cannot explain this “within” by that which goes on within it; you must presuppose it. This is the methodological situation.

What about religion, in relation to this? If this is the discussion, we cannot decide, in the name of religion, for the one or the other. We can only decide for a strict observation of the biological facts, and these biological facts have two sides, the one is the quantitative exchange of mechanical processes and physical causes, the other is the structural reality, the *Gestalt* (as *Gestalt* philosophy calls it) within which these things will happen. These are the two points of view and within that, the whole biological world is going on.

Theology is able to accept the predominance of the one as much as the predominance of the other method and does not have to decide for the one or the other. Of course, theologians are much more |inclined to become organicists than mechanists because they believe that this saves the concept of freedom, and with it responsibility, etc., which belongs to the theological concept of man. But this is not the case. Theology can accept [132]

a completely mechanistic method of chemical analysis for all living bodies, including the human body, without being afraid of it, because the question of that which is the *result* of this, namely spontaneity, life, and ultimately spirit, are never dependent on the way in which the organic bearers of all this are understood in scientific terms. They can be understood in this way and that way. As a scientist and a philosopher of science, I would say it is absolutely impossible to understand living beings *without* the concept of *Gestalt*. But I would *also* say: if this concept is introduced—like *some* philosophers did in earlier times—as a special cause beside the other causes, then we come into a kind of miraculous interference into the chemical processes, which is equally wrong. Such was the character of the old vitalist philosophy, which is now dismissed by almost everybody.

But if we say this is the situation with living beings, they are bearers of something which can have ultimate concern—we ourselves—how these bearers are described and calculated in terms of description and explanation cannot be dictated by theology at all. On the other hand, science cannot dictate, by being predominantly vitalistic or mechanistic, how this must be so that if it is this way or that way, theology is accepted or refuted. All this is an impossible mixture of dimensions and in no way necessary.

This brings me to the last and decisive point, namely the doctrine of man—“psychology,” as my neurologist friend Professor Kurt Goldstein in New York always says, doesn’t exist; the only thing |which does exist is the doctrine of man, because the psychological move- [133] ments are not something which can be separated from the totality of man. He is definitively a *Gestalt* philosopher, and believes that man is a living *Gestalt*, a unity, a living structure, of a monistic character, and not a composition of body and soul. But here again philosophical, metaphysical, and even religious elements come into the picture. I agree with him very definitely and believe that is the most adequate way of dealing with man as a totality, but even this is not decisive. And even here we must be cautious (I speak very much against myself in this lecture today!—[sotto voce]) because I am glad if I can find something which *seems* to help theology and which is useful as apologetic weapons. But I know that these weapons, after a certain time, turn always against the theologian who uses them. For this very reason, and after a long life of this experience, I ask you not to use them at all, insofar as you are [a] theologian. But don’t give them to the others either! [laughter]. They will turn against them *also*. We don’t need these apologetic weapons at all. What we need is something quite different, namely an understanding of the dimension in which religion moves. And if we have *this*, then we can have, let us say, four different theories of man:

One: the so-called materialistic theory. It is very interesting that a Church father such as Tertullian was a Stoic materialist and never had any doubts that this is completely compatible with a very radical and even in his later years fanatical, affirmation of Christianity. He was not worried about a materialistic interpretation of man, about the understanding of the soul as a refined substance, if only this soul is able to have what we experience in ourselves as having, namely the possibility of deciding, of deliberation, |of [134] feeling responsibility, guilt, hope, ecstasy, ultimate concern. And there is no materialistic theory which can prove to us that we cannot have this—so we simply have it! And if somebody nevertheless tries to do it, then we can tell him, “Now listen, you want to tell us the truth, with your materialistic interpretation of man. What is truth?” And in this moment, if he really understands the meaning of this question—“Truth is the result of deliberation and decision, of the freedom of research and the freedom of error”—now this lies in a dimension which has nothing to do, although it may be based on, the movement of atoms and electrons. I don’t deny that it is based on them, that without them it

doesn't exist. But the interesting thing is that these movements of electrons—or formerly atoms, in the primitive materialistic period—that these have the possibility of producing the atomistic theory and the materialistic philosophy. No materialist ever has explained how materialism can produce a materialistic theory, how matter and its movement can produce this. Or he must do something which, today, naturalism does—that is a very interesting movement, which shows how right we are here, in these discussions. The naturalists explained everything away. Now they have seen this is an impossible state because they would explain away themselves and their theory ... So they say: What we mean by nature is that it includes the aesthetic function of man, the possibility of creating works of art and even, if you want, they hesitatingly admit something like “religious experience.” All this is nature.

All right! Let us call all this “nature” instead of “universe,” “totality,” or “reality”—I don't mind. But in the moment in which naturalism has ceased to be reductionist—reducing everything to one level of reality—it has seen the impossibility in itself to refute things like what we called ultimate concern. [That is what I wanted to show, from the one theory. [135]

The other is the idealistic [theory]. Very often, in popular thinking, when you speak to somebody and he knows or feels that you are a theologian, then he calls you “idealistic.” And then I shock him and say, “I prefer to be a naturalist to being an idealist.” Idealism is much farther [sic.] away from Christianity than naturalism because idealism overlooks the reality of man as he is bound in matter, in unconscious strivings, in all that which depth psychology and sociology have shown to us. But even if one is idealist—and there are strong motives in the *epistemological* realm for idealism—then this is not a decision for or against Christianity.

Then there are other theories, the so-called parallelism theory: “There is the body, and there is the soul, and they go parallel.” This was the idea of Descartes and the Cartesian school, that what happens in the bodily world always has an analogy in the inner world of the soul, and God Himself is the ultimate wheel in this process which makes that these two machines are coordinated. Now this is a very abstruse theory, and philosophers have always tried to overcome it, but not very successfully. Now I don't mind this theory either; it has no bearing on the problems of what happens on this side and that side.

And if we have, then, a monistic theory, a *Gestalt* theory—which I personally prefer, and think is the true description of the human situation—then we can only say that that which is real in man is what the Greeks called soul, *psyché*, meaning life process, the dynamic power of his life process. And this dynamic power of a life process has two sides, the one side towards existence in time and space—this side we call “body,” it *embodies* itself in time and space; and the other side is “mind,” it is able to have relationship to universals, to principles, to laws, to norms, and is able to understand them and, beyond all this, to go into the ultimate problems of man's relationship to the eternal. All this is not a matter of physical or biological or psychological or sociological doctrine of man. All this is a matter of different theories, none of which contradicts essentially the situation of ultimate concern, and none of which *confirms* definitively the situation of ultimate concern. Here also we must be as cautious as in the other form of physics. [136]

This leads me to a last consideration, namely the problem of genesis and validity. This is a very important problem in all these discussions—the genetic problem in relationship to the problem of validity. I hear again and again, “If you know how, e.g., religion or art or whatever it may be, comes into existence, then you have refuted it, then it has been shown that it is *nothing else than*.” Now this is a very poor kind of thinking. Everything

has its genesis. Let us think about the genesis of love, of a love-relationship between a male and female. This love relationship, if you describe it genetically, has many causes: there is the chemical cause, which has to do with the sex substance of both sexes; there are the nervous dynamics in the body of each of them; there are longings of one for what he has not, and can have by the other one—all these things are there. There are many elements of anxiety, of loneliness, of guilt feelings, and there is finally something in which one individual being affirms another individual being in terms of surrender, trust, desire to be with him or her. Now this is the genesis. If you *say* that the fact that there are chemical processes participating in such a relationship [devaluates the meaning of such a love relationship, I hope those of you who have had an experience of a love relationship would reject that with great passion—not with fanaticism (that would show that you feel not very safe), but you would reject it with great passion, you would simply say: this is absurd; the value, the meaning, of this relationship, *in itself*, is independent of all those bearers which are, genetically speaking, responsible for it. You would not deny that the biological chemist shows all the chemical conditions which are necessary to drive man to woman and woman to man. You must accept them. They are the bearers of every love relationship in this realm. And you would *not* deny the psychologist to speak about the father-and-mother bondage, and the image which you seek unconsciously in choosing the object of your love—why should you? This is all true. Nevertheless, then finally there is love, and whether it is long or short, in the moment in which it does exist, it is a reality in itself, and no genetic interpretation of it can deprive it of its validity. [137]

Now the same thing is true of religion, i.e., of the state of being ultimately concerned. In this state *also*, all the chemical and physical presuppositions are present; you cannot deny them. And there are other things present which often have been used in order to devalue the meaning of religion. Here the genetic theory has taken the form of psychological or sociological explaining-away the content of religion. The psychological form, in primitive ages (I mean 50 years ago), had the form of saying that the gods are the creations of fear; and today, in a less primitive atmosphere in this respect, it is the father-image which is projected and made into a god. I think this is also very primitive, insofar as it is not even technically exact, because you cannot project anything without a |screen,¹ and the screen in this case *is* that which I call the experience of ultimate concern. If you have this experience, then you can do what the projector does, namely can have a little picture of the father, then you put it on the screen, but this screen is the ultimate, is the experience of the infinite, of the eternal, of the unconditional. And this *is not* the father, but the father is only the little picture which is put on it. Now this simple technical consideration is devastating for all projection theories, and you will hear and read, in the psychoanalytic literature, a lot of these projection theories. They all are *nonsense*, if they don't do what the older and wiser projection theories did, for instance Feuerbach, more than 100 years ago, when he said that religion is a projection of our infinite desire and infinite love. Now if *this* is the case, then infinity is the screen and then this theory makes sense. [138]

But if we *have* that screen, namely ultimate concern, then we can say, “All right, now come with your psychology. You are probably right. And I know what it means to interpret

¹ *[Remarks after the lecture] : The screen is the area of unconditional concern. The father- or mother-image can be projected onto the screen, thus deifying it into a god or goddess. [Question about Erich Fromm who says that when we become mature, we should get rid of the authoritarian father-image of God]: But love then becomes the symbol for the unconditional, for Fromm. We had a whole evening's discussion with him on the ultimacy of love. ...

the Calvinistic God in terms of father-image—or in this country, a little bit more of mother-image [smiling; laughter]— to see how the concrete traits are formed by the actual experiences our unconscious has with our parents, with our early friends, with persons who have impressed us very early, even with experiences with nature, with dreams, and what not—everything! I give you all the apparatuses in the world for projection purposes—psychology, in that case. And I give you one more, namely “collective unconscious,”|as it is described in depth psychology, which for sociological reasons projects a special type of religion in order to escape the miserable situation in this world, or in order to maintain the power of a ruling class, which Marx has called “ideology”—I grant you this also. [139]

But now, after all this has been said, we are again in the same situation, namely the situation: what about the relationship of ultimate concern, namely the experience of ultimacy, which we all have, to these images? And then the answer is very clear: these images are more or less purified projections. They can be purified. There are criteria of purification. But they are, even so, projections. You cannot have images of the ultimate without the material of your daily experience, and if the collective unconscious creates such images, then it is the experience of the individual and collective unconscious which produces them. In this point, all the projectionists are right. But in the moment in which they mean that this is an explaining-away of that which is *meant*, in the religious act, in the act of faith, or ultimate concern (as I have called it), then they are completely wrong, and they are not even adequate to their technical job, namely to show *why* these projections are made by human beings unconsciously, in all periods of human history, and what the impact behind it is.

Now this again is a matter of genesis and validity. The genesis of the concrete images of the ultimate is a matter of much scientific research, and no theology should interfere with that research, especially not in the cases in which individual persons are subjected to psychoanalytic treatment, or in which social classes are criticized by sociological treatment.