

Religion and Culture by Paul Tillich

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Lecture XIV, Nov. 17, 1955

We have begun the discussion of the relationship of religion and historical research and historiography. I tried first to show three elements in the work of the historian: the statement of the factual side, the attempt to explain the causal relations, and the understanding of the meaning. I said that the nearer we come from the first to the third level, the more the method is a method of participation. And the nearer we are to the factual, the more it is a method of detachment. History, like science, has methods of verification which are analogous with each other; the documentation in history, and the repeating experimentation in science, have an analogous character. Of course, history cannot be repeated, cannot be subjected to an experiment in *this* sense. But one can verify statements of one document by statements of an independent document which agrees with the first one.

All this finally leads us to the question of the relation of historical and religious truth. Here I come to a point which is especially important for that type of religion which is intimately related to history. There are different types, one type which is very little related to history. Most of the Asiatic and the European mystical forms of religion have this character, while there are other religions which are definitively related to historical events, such as Judaism, Islam, Christianity, the religion of the old Persians, and modern progressive humanism. In the case of the history-directed religions, the question of historical truth in relation to religious truth is one of the most important and most difficult things and has moved theological thought, especially in Protestantism, ever since the method of historical research was applied to the biblical literature. This is the place where we must first of all discuss the relationship of religious truth (or truth of faith, truth in terms of ultimate concern) and historical truth (truth in the sense of understanding historical realities, their factual, their explanatory, and their meaning side). |

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The general answer to this question is that there is no necessary conflict between historical research and truth of faith. There was actually as much conflict as there was in the scientific realm, but, as I said, and tried to show, this conflict is not necessary, so I will try to show now, that the conflict between historical truth and religious truth is not necessary either. The reality of these conflicts is based on concepts of faith which confuse faith with belief, or which define faith as acceptance of statements which have a small amount of evidence, but all this is not faith. As we have seen, faith must be defined in its innermost center as the state of being ultimately concerned.

Now if this is the case, then the dimension of faith and the dimension of historical truth are not the same. Historical research toward the biblical literature, both of the Old and the New Testament, has been done now for more than 200 years. And I believe that this historical research belongs to the greatest things that have ever happened in the history of religion and Christianity. It was something unheard of, that historical method was applied in the same way to the history of the Greek tribes, their cities, their government, their literature, and to the Jewish tribes and their literature, and to the early church and its literature. The fact that Protestantism dared to apply the same method to the one and to the other, has never happened before; it was not possible and is still not possible, in its radical form, on Catholic soil; it is impossible even in the slightest form on Islamic soil, where even the question whether the present text of the Koran is the original text, dictated by Mohammed, can lead to the death of somebody who publicly asks such a question!

Therefore we must say: It is one of the great events, which we should always look at with astonishment and with one of the very few justified expressions of pride, if we look at the whole history of Protestantism. Here, a justified pride is in place!

Now this, in the consequence of this tremendous act of historical research into the biblical writings: it has been shown that both the Old and New Testament include three elements of a different stylistic character: 1) Historical reports, in the sense in which I defined the work of the historian. 2) Legendary stories. 3) Mythological expressions. [155]

In many cases it is impossible to separate these elements from each other. It is almost impossible to separate, let us say in the Genesis story, the legendary from the mythological, and to discover in the stories of the Patriarchs some elements of what we usually call historical. In the New Testament there are anecdotal stories (as one should call them, as the stylistic characterization) about Jesus. In most cases it is very difficult and even impossible to state definitely what is historical, what is legendary. But it is possible to find mythological elements in many places.

The three elements can be distinguished in the following way. Historical are those which can be made probable, highly or lowly probable, by historical research, as events which couldn't have been (ideally speaking) photographed, phonographed and psychographed. Legendary – where the meaning, the understanding of the meaning, of an event produces a kind of story which transcends, goes beyond, that which can be photographed and phonographed, where elements are involved which still remain in the realm of the temporal and the spatial, and the human, but which transcend the empirical historical reality. I talked a few months ago with someone who made inquiries into the figure of Washington and told me how, in all schools, legendary elements (of which the real historians know) are still told and taught. And I added, “Rightly so,” because Washington is a symbolic figure as well as an empirically historical figure. And sometimes, not so much with national heroes but almost always in connection with religious figures, mythological elements come into the picture.

Now mythological elements are elements in which that which is ultimate, divine, unconditional appears and acts in forms which are temporal, spatial, causal and determined by the categories of substance, quantity, quality, etc. Such mythological elements are stories of the gods, as the word *mythos* says. And such elements are in all religious thought.

Now historical research has made it obvious that there is no way of getting, with more than a small amount of probability, at *most* of the historical events in the biblical literature, including those events which have produced the biblical picture of Jesus [156]

insofar as he is called the Messiah, the Christ. But analagous things have been done and can be done with the holy writings of non-Christian religions. There are also many legendary traditions and mythological elements. And if modern historical methods have been applied to them, then the same situation has become evident.

But all this does not necessarily mean that there is a conflict between religious truth and historical truth. The truth of faith, the religious truth, the truth about our ultimate concern, cannot be made dependent on the historical truth of the stories and legends in which the faith has expressed itself. And I would say this as strongly as possible: it is a disastrous distortion of the meaning of religion if it is identified with the belief in the historical validity of stories. And it is a disastrous distortion of the *christian* idea of faith if it is identified with the belief in the historical validity of the *biblical* stories. Unfortunately this disastrous situation exists both on high and on low levels of sophistication. People say that others, or they themselves, cannot have faith – for instance Christian faith, or Jewish faith – because, they tell us, they are not able to believe, for instance, in the biblical miracle stories, because they don't think they are reliably documented – more reliable, they would add, than most of the miracle stories which were told at the same time, and very often had the same content in the whole pagan religious world around Judaism and Christianity. |

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Now *nobody* can say that these stories are well-documented. They have no high degree of probability – most of them, at least – and it is not a matter of faith to find out the degrees of probability or of improbability of any of these special stories. Some are *very well* documented, but this is a matter of research and of nothing else. And it *has* to be done with all the tools of a solid philological and historical method. No one should judge about one verse of the New Testament which tells a story, who has not gone through an iron philological discipline. And I would like that this would be taken as seriously as it was done 100 years ago, when philology was really philos, namely “friend,” of everybody who wanted to go into the study of the meaning of existence, as it is given in the documents of the past. Without such philological work, nothing historically probable can be said. And no intensity of faith can replace this work of philological exactitude and preciseness. And I can tell you – I had to learn that myself as a student – philological method can be *very* precise; it isn't vague; and conjectures can be very solid, and *many* of these conjectures which have been made about texts of the past have been proved to be true by later discovery of original texts. This is not vague, as scientists often think it is, but it is a precise method which can lead to a high degree of probability – never *beyond* that, never to certainty, but to a high degree of probability.

And so I would say: it isn't a matter of faith to decide whether the presently used edition of the Muslim Koran is identical with the original text, although this is the fervent belief of most |of the adherents of Mohammedanism. But this doesn't *prove* it!

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It isn't a matter of faith to decide whether large parts of the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses, as they are called, are Priestly wisdom of the period after the Babylonian exile. And it isn't a matter of faith to decide whether the book of Genesis contains more myths and sacred legend than actual history, even if there are some historical elements. And I can go on in this way. It is not a matter of faith to decide whether the expectation of the final catastrophe of the universe – as it is envisaged in Jewish apocalypics and in the last book of the New Testament – whether this is a heritage from the Persian religion (which, with greatest probability, it is). But that is not a problem of faith. It is not a matter of faith to decide how much legendary, how much mythological, and how much historical material is amalgamated in the stories about the birth and the resurrection of

the Christ. We only can say, with high probability, that all these elements, and beyond this, great poetic power, are united in the writing of these stories. But that is not a matter of faith. It is not a matter of faith to decide which version of the reports about the early days of the church has the greatest probability. All these questions – And they go through the whole [of] church history, ideas like apostolic succession, the institution of the Pope in Rome, and all this – all these questions must be decided in terms of more or less probability by historical research. They cannot be decided in any other way, they are questions of historical truth, not of the truth of faith.

Now what can faith do? If a religion (such as those I enumerated in the beginning, namely [Judaism and Christianity]) are *related* to history, are based on historical events, and keep these events always present in reports, legends and myths, what can faith do, under these circumstances? Faith can say that something has happened *in history*, to me as an historical person, which is of ultimate concern to me, because it points to the answer of my ultimate concern, namely the concern of the meaning and being of my own reality. Faith, for instance, *can* say that the Old Testament Law, which is given as the Law of Moses – this is historically improbable – that this Law which we have, which is in our hands, has unconditional validity for those who are grasped by it – in this case, for those who are faithful Jews, and partly for Christians too – no matter how much or how little can be traced to a historical figure of the name of Moses. There is no doubt that a historical figure is *probable*, but it is not for *certain*, it is not a matter of religious certainty that the Law of Moses is given by Moses, and certainly nobody believes, who has ever started historical research, that what goes under the name of “Moses” is actually given by Moses. [159]

Faith can say that the reality which is manifest in the New Testament picture of Jesus as the Christ, has *power*, perhaps *saving* power, for those who are grasped by it. This, faith can say – because that is the foundation of faith itself. But then faith can add: it doesn’t matter how much or how little can be traced, in terms of historical research, to the historical figure which is called Jesus of Nazareth.

We must be able to stand a question which sometimes shocks people: what if we discover the police records of Nazareth of the year one to thirty and find no man of the name of “Jesus” there? [He is not in the files; there are birth registers of *all* of them who lived then, but he didn’t exist there. Now what then?]* [160]

Now in this concreteness, you must sometimes be able to imagine the question. You can also do it in a more modern American way, without police, namely imagine that there was a time Time [Magazine] reporter, and he couldn’t discover it!

Now if you ask such questions, you see what I mean with “historical research.” We must *stand* such possibilities, even if they are infinitely small in comparison with all probabilities, even from the point of view of historical research. But if we never face the extreme possibilities, we never face what is *not* extreme, in its true character. Boundary situations have the great advantage that they reveal what is *within* the boundaries. But if you never *go* to the boundaries and ask the question, you will never be able to find out what is within the boundaries, what its real character is, because you can find that out *only* if you trespass the boundary line. I don’t know whether I said that in this or the other class, but I will repeat it: Heidegger has made one very great statement, namely that if man were not able to run ahead to his death and to trespass, in his imagination, the boundary line of his life, he wouldn’t know what his life is all about, he wouldn’t be what *he is*, a centered, united person which looks ahead in the future and back into the past. In the same sense, I have tried———*In the discussion

period after a lecture at the Philosophy Club of Boston University, Dr. Tillich replied to a similar question, concerning the absence of the name of Jesus in archaeological records: “Then the Man had another name!” —implying that there *must* have been a flesh-and-blood personality behind the Christian movement, but whether or not “Jesus” was His name does not validate or invalidate the truth of faith. – Ed. |to guide you here, with my radical statements, to the boundary line of historical possibilities. Nothing else than this. But this must be done. And in academic work we *always* must exhaust the possibilities of a problem to its bitter end – and it is a bitter end to which I brought it, at this moment. But that, we must do! [161]

Now I continue. Faith can assert its own foundation: for the Jews, the Mosaic Law, in which they are living; for the Christians, the picture of Jesus as the Christ, by which they are transformed into a new reality; in Mohammedanism, the words of the Prophet; in Buddha, the illumination of the man who was called the Buddha. But faith cannot assert the historical conditions which made it possible that these men became matters of ultimate concern for large sections of humanity. Faith includes certainty about its own foundation, for instance, about an event in history which has transformed and is continuously transforming life and history for the faithful. But faith does *not* include historical knowledge about the way in which this event took place. Therefore faith cannot be shaken by historical research. And that is the main point to which I wanted to guide you. After we have reached the boundary line and its bitterness of ultimate possibilities, we can now go back and can enjoy the fact that we are living in the reality of an ultimate concern and that this cannot be taken away from us by any historical skepticism which we ourselves must have if historical events are subject to critical analysis.

Therefore the 200 years of historical criticism, and the criticism of all other religions with respect to the historical validity of the events which have created these religions, are not able |to undercut the truth of faith. This is a tremendously important result! [162]

Let’s for a moment imagine again the other alternative, the alternative that faith includes the belief in the photographic actuality of historical events. What would be the consequence? For those who have no researching mind, it doesn’t mean anything whether the solution is this or that. They simply live in myth and legend and don’t distinguish it from legend and history. But for those in whom the historical-critical mind has been awakened – and this should be, *without exception*, everybody who participates in academic work – a terrible split of consciousness would occur, and *has* occurred, in many people. They would have to carry the burden not only of the risk of their faith – which is a burden which you *can* carry because here your own being is involved, and you can carry it joyfully – but they have to carry another burden, namely to sacrifice the demand of scholarly honesty, which has shaped their conscience. They have to give up this conscience, this radicalism of honesty in scholarly research. This means they are driven into a split consciousness. They become schizophrenic, in the original sense of the word: split consciousness. And often they become *actually* either neurotic or schizophrenic. And if not, they become indifferent, because they cannot stand the split which, if taken seriously, no one can stand.

Now we should be aware of this alternative. And then, if we are, then I hope you will understand that I felt the obligation to lead you to the uttermost boundary line of historical possibility in order to make clear how the situation is within these boundary lines. | [163]

But it wouldn’t be only a matter of *our* split consciousness – something more is involved in it. It would be a matter of a split in God Himself. If man had to sacrifice his

scientific honesty in order to have ultimate concern about what is ultimate, namely the meaning and being of his life, the ground of being and meaning of his life, if this were *necessary*, then God would demand the negation of God, because the rules of scientific work are the rules of the structure of reality to which science has to subject itself. And these structures of reality, which are also the structures of our mind, are by creation, and they are *good* by creation! If one has to sacrifice either in one's doctrine of miracles or in one's doctrine of revelation, subjectively or objectively, the structure of mind and reality in order to reach one's ultimate concern, then this reality is evil and cannot claim truth and cannot claim created goodness. And then Christianity is back in the midst of the pagan Manichaeism movements which have no idea of the *good* creation, but where the God of grace stands in conflict with the creator-God. That's where it finally comes to!

Now if we look at the modern situation in the light of these discussions, then we can say that the conflict of historical research and religion – of course, the same as science and religion, and, as we shall see in a different way, of philosophy and religion – that these conflicts have a much profounder meaning than sociological analyses will usually tell us. Of course there is also sociology involved – the will-to-power of the churches on the one hand, the will to overcome the reactionary tendencies of the churches by the representatives of science, especially in the universities, on the other hand: [these are sociological movements and often very profound psychological-emotional things behind it. All this is true. But there is much more behind it. This “much more” is the really important thing about it, otherwise the emotion could die down, as they always do after a certain time, and we could live in peace ever after. But this is not the case. The problem remains and is going on all the time, and it is a problem of ultimate religious significance, the problem about the structure of our reality: whether our reality is as paganism mostly has seen it, as Manichaeism has expressed it, in the most radical and powerful way, namely that the God who has saving power is *another* God than the God who has created this miserable world!]

And I tell you there are more amongst us who, without using this terminology, have such feelings about the state of things. There are *many* people who *feel* that the world is a failure – and I understand that – and that if there is salvation, it must be salvation *out* of the world and not *in* the world. Therefore the world, including the greatest in it – as for instance the arts, sciences, history, philosophy – has to be sacrificed.

Now this is the one possibility, and against this possibility I am talking here, during these *whole* lectures, from the first hour on to the last next semester.

The other possibility is that one follows the Old and New Testament thinking, that one believes in the goodness of creation-as-creation, and the structures of mind and reality, and that one believes that the miserable state of the world which no one can deny, is a matter of creaturely freedom – perhaps unavoidable if the creature shall reach his fulfillment, but in any case is not a [matter of a counter-God from whom we have to flee to the God *above* the world.]

Now that's what is at stake in these discussions. If historical research into the biblical sources is limited in its complete scientific freedom *byfaith*, then we have a relapse into the pagan Manichaeism worldview and have given up that fundamental principle for which Christianity has fought a life-and-death struggle when it accepted the Old Testament and rejected Manichaeism.

Now to this depth, such seemingly methodological considerations must be traced. There the real decisions are made – and of course one *still* can decide for the one against the other side, but the decision in which I believe, which is identical with the Jewish-

Christian-Islamic and most of the modern humanist tradition, is *for* the principle: “being-as-being is good,” historical research as historical research is good, and doesn’t need to be sacrificed for the sake of salvation!