

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 XV, Tues., Nov. 22, 1955

Discussion with students: *Question:* Once historical probability is established, what relation can that which has been so established have to religion or faith?

Answer (Paul Tillich): Yes, now this leads into a very large and difficult discussion about the indirect importance of historical research for our whole understanding of religion. There is indeed an *indirect* influence, indirect insofar as the whole cultural climate is determined by our understanding of our past, and if, for instance, we know something about the way in which dogma has come into existence by those who have given us insight into the history of the Christian doctrine, then this does not have *direct* influence on faith, it is not the *basis* of faith, but it has indirect influence insofar as we see the problem of the past, the influences of politics, of economics, of religious personalities and their special psychological types on the development of a dogma, or of the development of the biblical writings. Now all this is of great importance from the point of view of our general picture of the history of the world, as for instance the scientific results are indirectly important for the understanding of our picture of the natural reality. But neither the one nor the other can become an immediate foundation of faith, nor is even *supposed* to become. So historical probability, like *all* historical work, has, like all *scientific* work, an indirect influence on our relationship to reality. But we never can say it is the foundation of faith, so that if science or history made these statements, faith is either threatened or concerned – this is the thesis I want to state here.

Question: Is not the concept of Jesus as the final revelation based upon the historicity of Jesus? If so, does not this make theology dependent on historical validity? |

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Question: If Christianity is the message that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, why would it not destroy Christianity if it could be proven there was no Jesus?

Answer (Paul Tillich): ... These two questions are difficult, but point to the same reality. It is a little difficult that I have to go into theological problems which belong to the system of theology, in order to answer these questions in a lecture on religion and culture generally, but I will try to do my best because I have been asked these questions for twenty-two years without interruption [laughter], and never was able to answer them – but nobody else was able [to] either! [laughter], so we are all in the same boat.

There are only two answers which are unambiguous. The one is that you accept what the Bible says – and that is that there is no problem except that there are some hidden problems to know what the Bible really says [laughter], but these problems I will not

take too seriously at this moment – there is certainly an assurance about innumerable facts about the life of Jesus. The other unambiguous answer is that faith is a kind of belief, beliefs are always in the realm of probability, and if the existence of Jesus, or any other statement of religion, is a matter of very questionable belief, then faith also is questionable. Now these are two unambiguous answers; both, in my opinion, are either meaningless (the latter one, for instance) because then we would not have faith at all; we would have only belief. The other is dependent on the relationship of research to faith, and if you define faith as being-ultimately-concerned, then you must take historical research seriously. So the two unambiguous answers are very simple answers and very wrong answers, as simple answers very often are. [We cannot accept the one or the other, and the reasons for this, I gave in this whole [course of lectures] and in all my books, and I am not the only one who gives these answers: the whole history of theology in the last 200 years has put us before this problem, and if we want to escape it, we are irresponsible to what historical destiny has given us. That is my general answer. [168]

Then we come to the real difficulty of the situation, and this difficulty is certainly great. It is not so easy to answer, and it needs all our good will, first of all – and I have very often experienced in these discussions the good will on the one side is very much lacking. The criticism is very easy because it is a very profound problem and a very implicit and very intricate one which needs good will in order to be answered by anybody. But if there is the good will, then I think we can come to an answer, and this answer must be that faith includes its own foundation. Its own foundation is an event, in which he who has faith himself, is transformed. This cannot be denied, because it is an immediate experience, but the historical way in which this event came to pass, what the name of the person was, is not a matter of the foundation of faith itself. That is a matter of historical probability. And in these two questions – “If there was no Jesus of Nazareth” – this question is very ambiguous because if it says there was *nobody* [sic.], then of course faith would say, “Something has *happened* which has its reflection in the picture of Jesus-as-the-Christ. But if somebody says it means just this man who *must come* from Nazareth, then I say ... must he come ... [?] ... that is the tradition that comes and this tradition is very probable and very powerfully symbolic, but it is not the foundation [of my faith, in my ultimate destiny, in life and death. So if we are a little bit willing to dissolve the ambiguity of such questions, then we are able to answer them. [168]

If we are not willing, we can never come to an answer, and then you are forced to go into the alternatives: you must say, either let us dismiss all historical research and let us simply take what the Bible says and take all the legends and myths literally – all right! – I don’t mind this, but then, he who does that must be conscious that in this moment he drops the two or three hundred years of historical research and problems, the historical destiny of historical honesty in which we are standing.

The other alternative: He says “I drop faith and make it a matter of probability, and Jesus is then one of the other prophets – it does not matter *who* said his words; if somebody said them, that is enough.” But that is not the Christian faith either. So my answer is an attempt to avoid these two impossibilities, and I personally have not even the slightest doubt that there the problem lies. I certainly have doubt about the adequacy of my formulations – *everybody* should have – but I have no doubt about the necessity to go in this direction and to avoid the two other alternatives. That is my answer to these questions. – And [he] who knows better, please let us know! [spoken slowly and somberly – some laughter].

Lecture:

We must now go to something else today, to a subject which is perhaps even more involved than the problem of science, and the problem of history, in relation to religion, namely the problem of philosophy-of-religion to religion. |

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The truth of faith and philosophical truth – that is our next subject. I am sorry we must wait for a whole week before we can go on, after I give the initial statements today, but this also is historical destiny! [smiling, referring to the Thanksgiving recess – slight laughter]. Now we have seen that neither scientific nor historical truth can affirm or negate the truth of faith. If it could, it wouldn't be truth of faith, but would be probability of scientific research. And the truth of faith can neither affirm nor negate scientific or historical truth. No statement of faith can guarantee any scientific statement or can guarantee any historical statement – about that, I just spoke. Now perhaps here I should make one more remark.

If someone says, "Now is it not a historical statement if you say something has happened which changed me?," then you can also say, "Is it not a historical statement to say that I do exist?" That is not a historical statement, but that is a statement of immediacy. My being *inhistory*, my being influenced *by history*, my being myself, is not a problem of historical research but a problem of immediate self-awareness, and the implications of immediate self-awareness, even if they fall into the bodily reality ("I have a body") and the historical reality ("I live in the Christian tradition"), even then they are not a matter of biological research or historical research. No biological research can take away my awareness of my body from myself. No historical research can take away my awareness of being *this* being, *this* kind of self which has in itself all the historical reality of his tradition, etc. So here we have the point of certainty, namely the point of our own being.

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Now from this follows (and I repeat this): no scientific or historical truth can affirm or negate the truth of faith. And the truth of faith can neither affirm nor negate scientific or historical truth. This is the presupposition of the existence of faith at all. In the moment in which one of these statements is wrong, then we have to give up faith, or we have to give up the scientific or historical truth. I am not inclined to give up the one or the other; I believe – and this is *itself* a matter of my faith – that Providence has put man into this situation of different dimensions of knowledge, and that he has to *stand* this, and not to escape it by one of the wrong alternatives which I just described.

But now the question arises whether philosophical truth has the same relation to the truth of faith, or whether the relation is more complex. I don't hesitate to say that it is more complex. Even something else follows from this greater complexity of the relation of philosophical and religious truth, namely if philosophical truth has a very complex relationship to the truth of faith, then this also makes the relation to scientific and historical truth more complex because there is philosophical truth in both of them; philosophy is the all-embracing element in all cognitive endeavor, and therefore if the problem "philosophy of religion" is asked, then here *also* the difficulty (or complexity, let us better say) is greater.

Now this great complexity of the question of the relation between philosophy and religion is the reason for the innumerable discussions about the relation of faith and philosophy which are going on since the days of Xenophanes up to the day in which we are living – without interruption; and they are |going on certainly in the same way in the Indian culture and in the Arabian and Islamic cultures.

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Now this means that here is another existentially human problem, the problem nobody can escape, and therefore a problem everybody wants to escape, because the problems

which we *cannot* escape are at the same time those problems which are so hard that we would *like* to escape them. One of the ways to escape them is that one shares in the opinion which is very popular, that philosophy and faith, philosophy and religion, are enemies and destroy each other. The trouble is that such a popular escape – which we don't mind because the popular mind is not predisposed to find a solution to such problems: they have to find the solution to *other* problems, in which these problems are *implicit*, but not *explicit* – but if theologians do the *same* thing and do it *after* they have used (in stating such a thing) philosophical concepts, then a kind of passionate anger can arise, not because they don't see the problem, but because they don't see their self-contradiction. And they *should* see their self-contradiction. They *should* – that's their duty, and therefore anger is in place here, not because of another opinion but because of an irresponsible self-contradiction in continuously using concepts which are produced by philosophy in order to reject philosophy in the theological endeavor. That is something which I would call irresponsible.

Now if someone comes to me and says, "I don't see that I use philosophical concepts, I use only biblical concepts," then he might be excused insofar as he doesn't know very much about the Bible – and ignorance always can be excused – but if he reads the Bible with *knowledge*, then he will find that even the Pauline letters are full of Stoic ethics, full of Neoplatonic concepts, and [that even in the *Old Testament* a special interpretation of time and space, and the universe, is always present, and that if they use – even *only!* – biblical concepts, they are using philosophical concepts. But they never *do* that only, even if they *tell* you; they use also the concept of man, they use the concept of history, they use the concept of becoming and of being, but if someone asked, "What do you mean with becoming and being and history and man and animal?," they say, "I cannot answer this because that is philosophy." Now that is the thing which raises a real wrath in me! [some laughter] – not because of ignorance – I don't mind ignorance; we are here in order to overcome it in ourselves and others – but I mind irresponsible self-contradiction out of emotional motives. [172]

The difficulty of every discussion concerning philosophy as such is the fact that there is no definition of philosophy *which is not already a philosophical system in nuce*, a condensed philosophical system – that's the difficulty. If you read all the nice (or I would say abominable) textbooks on philosophy, and in the first paragraph you read a *definition* of philosophy, then read this paragraph again after you have studied the whole book – and perhaps even a real philosopher – and then go back to the definition and you will immediately know what kind of philosophy this man has who wrote this textbook. Here again we should be honest and say that there is no possible definition of philosophy which is not the immediate expression already of a philosophical system. You cannot escape, by textbook knowledge, from a *decision* in philosophy – that's what I wanted to say. | [173]

Now this is the situation, and it cannot be changed. This situation includes that we cannot have a definite concept of philosophy which should be accepted by all philosophers and which is a meaningful definition. Instead of that, we can have a kind of pre-philosophical description about which we can agree – and the popular mind can help us here – namely the idea that philosophy has to deal with more universal problems than everything else. Now this is certainly not a definition. This is a very poor superficial, popular description and nothing else. But we cannot do more in the present moment and can find out perhaps whether this will lead us to a little more ... [?]. Philosophy is the attempt to answer the general questions about the nature of reality and the nature of human existence. Perhaps this non-definition, but description, is a way out, and we *need*

such a way out, otherwise we could not even [have] specialized departments of philosophy. What is that? – a “department of philosophy.” Every university has a “department of philosophy,” and if somebody is asked “What do they do in these departments?,” no one could answer it [laughter], because if you want to answer it in a clear definition (as in “department of mathematics”), namely exactly *know* what is done there, then you have to ask each of the philosophers and then you will ask not [for] a departmental answer, but the answer of individual philosophers. And *rightly* so – it cannot be otherwise. Nevertheless we have “departments of philosophy” and everyone knows what that means, namely it means here some rather general questions are asked, and each of these philosophers answers them [in his way and, on the basis of his answer, calls philosophy something different from the other one. In any case, the most general questions are answered. [174]

Now perhaps this can help us to go one little step farther, but if you don’t want [to], don’t do it. But I want to do it because it is a little bit more helpful than this departmental *description* – which is not a definition.

Which are the most general questions somebody can ask? Now of course the negative side is easy to answer. There are questions which do not deal with the nature of a special *sphere* of reality, for instance the special sphere of mathematical structure, of space and time, or of the physical structure of matter, or the historical structure of becoming. But they ask something more general, and then they may go back to all this, but first they both go to something more universal. And perhaps it is meaningful to say they ask about the nature of reality, which is present in *all* these realms. Now that is also very simple and is not a clear definition, but it is a more adequate description than our very first was. This more adequate description says that philosophy tries to find the universal categories in which everything that is, is experienced. Philosophy deals with the structure of being universally. I don’t know whether everybody would accept this definition, but for me this seems to be the only possible way of dealing with philosophy, which is a reality, and of describing it in such a way that almost every philosopher, at least in the past, can be shown as participating in this endeavor to say something about the nature of being universally. If such a notion of philosophy [is presupposed, then the relation of philosophical truth and the truth of faith can be determined. Then philosophical truth is truth about the structure of being – which of course includes the structure of knowing, which is a special part of being; or the structure of history, the structure of all categories, of existence, the essential, and what not. All this is included. But in any case we can sum it all up when we say “The structure of being.” [175]

The truth of being is truth about our ultimate concern. So we now have two preliminary answers: philosophical truth is truth about the structure of being; religious truth is truth about our ultimate concern.

Up to this point, the relation seems to be very similar to that between the truth of faith and *scientific* truth. But there is a difference. There is a point of identity between the truth of faith and philosophical truth which is only indirectly in the scientific realm. There are two ultimates here. The philosophical question asks the question of ultimate reality and its structure, which is in every special reality; and religion asks the question of what concerns us ultimately, which certainly *also* must be ultimately real, otherwise it wouldn’t concern us, ultimately. Only *ultimate* reality can concern us ultimately. The transitory things cannot concern us ultimately.

So we are here in the problem of two ultimates: the philosophical and the theological. In *both* cases something *ultimate* is involved: ... in religion we want symbolic truth about ultimate reality, because it is a matter of ultimate concern; in philosophy we want

conceptual truth about the manifestation of ultimate reality. |

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Philosophical truth consists in true concepts concerning the manifestation of the ultimate in the universe. The truth of faith consists in true symbols concerning our existential *relation* to the ultimate.

Now here we are in the center of the problem. The relation between these two is the problem with which we have to deal; the relation between these two is the problem which has *always* been discussed. The first question you will probably raise is, “Why does philosophy use concepts, and why does faith use symbols, if both try to express the same ultimate?” The answer is, “The *difference* of the *relation* to the ultimate.” In the case of philosophy, the relation is detached description of the basic structure in which the ultimate manifests itself in the universe; in the case of faith, it is the *involved* expression of our *concern* of the meaning of ultimate reality *for us*.

Some of you have read or know Luther’s catechisms. In Luther’s catechisms, there is always the phrase “for you,” and he says the “for you” demands faithful hearts. Now this can lead us to the difference. In the moment in which the relationship has a “*for you*” character, it becomes existential. And then we are in the realm of faith, and it is a matter of decision, of daring, of risk, of doubt, but not of detached description. The philosopher, as a philosopher, gives a detached description. He speaks of essential and existential being, he speaks of being and becoming, dynamics and form, world and self. He speaks, with Aristotle, of matter and form, of entelechia, etc.; | The theologian, if he speaks of religious language, speaks of the divine love forgiving the sinner, or of the divine grace giving power-of-being to those who are in despair, etc. Now this is the fundamental difference, but both speak of ultimate reality because only that which is the ultimate, the ground of being and meaning, can be the ground of everything that is, and can be our ultimate concern. [177]

Now up to this point, everything is neat and, I hope, comparatively clear. But now the difficulty arises which is very simple to state, but very difficult to describe. The difficulty is that the philosopher is a human being and the theologian is a man who has the possibility of thinking. That makes all the difference. *They both are men*; they both participate in human existence; they both have ultimate concern; and they both ask the question of the structure of being, because no human being can completely escape these two realities which belong to human nature. As I said in another place, every human being philosophizes and theologizes, [just] as every human being moralizes and politicizes. These categories are functions of the human mind in which everybody potentially participates, whether he does it actually or not.

Now this means: the question is not whether he *develops* the one or the other thing – the peasant boy doesn’t usually develop philosophy, and not even theology; nevertheless he asks questions which put to shame great philosophers, especially if he has not been distorted by the adults in his immediate encounter with reality. And the philosopher has to die and has to anticipate his having-to-die, and has to ask the question about his being, in face of his having-to-die. No one | can completely escape philosophizing, or asking the question of human existence and its meaning. [178]

Now since this is so, we can say: although it is comparatively simple to say “The philosopher asks the question of the ultimate in terms of the structure of being; the theologian asks the same question in terms of our ultimate concern – this is the difference” – although it is easy to make this distinction and to say the first is a detached question, the other is an involved question, *actually* this difference never occurs in the *life* of the philosopher or in the *life* of the theologian. As human beings, staying in existence, both

ask both questions, and the influence of the one question on the other, and the one answer on the other, is always visible. An analysis of every philosophical system, or essay, or fragment shows that in the direction in which the philosopher asks his questions, and in the *preference* he gives to special answers, not only is cognitive material elaborated, but also ultimate concern is directing. Give me *any* philosopher, and I will show you how his religious tradition, how his personal anxiety, how the situation of his period, with the decisive questions and problems of existential character, determines both the directions of his questions and the color of his answers. It is *easy* to show this, in most cases; more difficult in other cases. The philosopher is driven by a passion which is both passion for knowledge, but also passion to get an answer to the question of *his* life, of *his* existence. And the amalgamation of these two passions makes the great philosopher. *All* great philosophers have these two elements in their philosophical passion. The Aristotelian astonishment about our being is always an astonishment [both about structure and reality, [179] and about the meaning of existence. Therefore the philosophers *always* have theological substance. Their power is just the unity of these things – look at the Greek philosophers, at the Indian philosophers, at the philosophers of the modern period (not to speak of the Medieval ones from Leibniz to Spinoza), to Kant and Hegel. There seems to be only one exception, namely the positivistic line of philosophers, from Locke and Hume to present-day logical positivism. This seems to be an exception to this rule. But this is only [so] if you look at them very superficially. *Some* of them restrict themselves to special problems which *needed* to be asked in their time: the epistemological problem, in the time of Locke and Hume and Kant; the logical problem in *our* period; and the linguistic problem, which is so urgently needed today. This is certainly necessary, is an important endeavor, and justified. But partly it doesn't cover the whole of it what has been called philosophy. And beyond this, if it is *more* than this, in the moment in which it makes criticisms of other philosophers, of theologians, it becomes philosophy itself and shows an ultimate concern. It shows an interpretation of being by relating language to reality, semantics to that to which the *seimata*, the signs, point. And in the moment in which they do this, in which the logical positivists or epistemologists speak about reality at all – and they do it more and more today – in the same moment they become sons of classical philosophy, and their rejection of all philosophy is self-contradictory. You cannot escape, even if you are a logical positivist, the fundamental structure of humanity, namely to ask the question of the meaning [of your existence implicitly and explicitly. [180]

Discussion with students:===([After the lecture, in conversation with student, Edwin Knopf:] –concerning the question about the existence, etc., of Christ – The transformation of personal reality can only happen in personal reality. ...

Question: What difference does it make whether or not He was forced and unwilling to sacrifice ... ?

Answer (Paul Tillich): Then nothing was changed, because we all are unwilling. And He also was unwilling, and finally accepted. What would be the difference for personal life if somebody was murdered? That is nothing. The very fact of being murdered is nothing ... The decisive thing is the personal transformation. This personal transformation is possible only in a personal acceptance of the sacrifice of finitude. –